UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE
School of Management

MEANINGS FOR LUXURY FASHION BRANDS AMONG YOUNG WOMEN IN FINLAND AND CHINA

Marketing
Master's thesis
November 2014
Supervisor: Pekka Tuominen

Sonja Lahtinen

ABSTRACT

University of Tampere School of Management, Marketing

Author: LAHTINEN, SONJA
Title: MEANINGS FOR LUXURY FASHION BRANDS AMONG YOUNG WOMEN IN FINLAND AND CHINA
Master's Thesis: 110 pages, 5 appendix pages
Date: November 2014
Key words: Luxury brands, brand meanings, CCT, ZMET

The current market for luxury fashion brands is experiencing great changes. Considering the dynamic growth in the luxury market and the increasing availability of luxury fashion brands to a wider range of consumers than ever before, the luxury fashion sector has transformed itself from the traditional conspicuous consumption model to incorporate a variety of different values and meanings of the global, postmodern consumers. In the resulting context of market fragmentation, brand owners are facing a challenge in understanding what their brands mean to their customers and how these meanings are constructed in the ever-changing marketplace.

In light of the above, the purpose of this research is to describe and analyze how young female luxury consumers construct meanings for luxury fashion brands in Finland and China. To extend the understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the brand meanings, and to provide interpretations of how cultural and social factors contribute to the construction of these meanings, this thesis is philosophically based on the social constructionist paradigm. The research data was generated through the projective ZMET method in twelve interviews, of which six were conducted with Chinese participants and six with Finnish participants.

The theoretical framework of the research is built from two streams of literature. The first part elucidates the concept of luxury and further introduces the three dimensions of luxury brands, based on previous research: the functional, the experiential and the symbolic. In the second part, semiotics is applied to explain the structure of brand meanings, and the model of interactive transfer among three elements – the culture, the brand and the individual – is introduced to demonstrate how these meanings are co-created in the marketplace.

Based on the various and heterogeneous brand meanings that respondents associated with luxury fashion brands, eight thematic orientations were formed, marking different meaning orientations that organize respondents' beliefs and emotions towards the luxury fashion brands. The central themes were similar between the Finnish and Chinese respondents, but differences appeared in the surface sub-meanings. For Finnish respondents, the brand meanings were more private, subjective and experiential, while for the Chinese, the meanings were more social, objective and utilitarian in their nature. Analyzing the differences revealed the role of cultural and social factors in the construction of brand meanings.

The interpretive repertoire of Finnish and Chinese respondents extends the meanings far beyond the ones that brands have created by themselves and those that have been recognized by prior research, showing considerable sophistication and dedication from the consumers in the interpretation and co-creation of the luxury fashion brands. The findings may assist brand managers in developing coherent, integrated global brand strategies that are sensitive to local differences and focus on creating personally meaningful brand experiences.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tampereen yliopisto Johtamiskorkeakoulu, markkinointi

Tekijä: LAHTINEN, SONJA
Tutkielman nimi: MEANINGS FOR LUXURY FASHION BRANDS AMONG YOUNG WOMEN IN FINLAND AND CHINA
Pro gradu -tutkielma: 110 sivua, 5 liitesivua
Aika: Marraskuu 2014
Avainsanat: Luksusbrändit, brändimerkitykset, CCT, ZMET

Luksustuotteet on perinteisesti yhdistetty korkeaan hintaan ja sosiaaliseen statukseen, mutta luksusmarkkinoiden dynaaminen kasvu sekä luksusmuotibrändien leviäminen aiempaa laajemmille kuluttajamarkkinoille on muuttanut perinteisiä statuskulutuksen ympärille luotuja luksusmarkkinoita kohti moniulotteisempaa, postmodernia merkitysmaailmaa. Markkinoiden fragmentoituessa tutkijoiden ja brändijohtajien on arvioitava uudelleen mitä brändit merkitsevät kuluttajille ja kuinka nämä merkitykset syntyvät markkinoilla.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kuvata ja analysoida kuinka nuoret, naispuoliset luksusmuodin kuluttajat antavat merkityksiä luksusmuotibrändeille Suomessa ja Kiinassa. Laajentaakseen ymmärrystä brändimerkitysten heterogeenisestä luonteesta ja selvittääkseen kuinka kulttuuriset ja sosiaaliset tekijät osallistuvat näiden merkitysten rakentumiseen, tutkimus pohjautuu sosiaaliseen konstruktionismiin, joka on yhdenmukainen kulttuurisen kuluttajatutkimuksen periaatteiden kanssa. Kvalitatiivinen aineisto luotiin projektiivista ZMET -tutkimusmenetelmää hyödyntäen kahdessatoista yksilöhaastattelussa, joista kuusi haastattelua toteutettiin kiinalaisten, ja kuusi haastattelua suomalaisten, osallistujien kanssa.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu kahdesta osasta. Ensimmäisessä osassa tarkastellaan luksuksen käsitettä ja esitellään aiempaan tutkimukseen perustuen luksusbrändien kolme ulottuvuutta: toiminnallinen, kokemuksellinen ja symbolinen ulottuvuus. Toisessa osassa tutkitaan kulttuuristen merkitysten rakennetta semiotiikan avulla, ja merkitysten siirtymisen vuorovaikutteinen malli selventää edelleen kolmen elementin – kulttuurin, brändin, ja yksilön – roolia merkitysten syntymisessä.

Osallistujien luksusmuotibrändeille antamien merkitysten perusteella luotiin kollektiivinen käsitekartta, joka koostuu kahdeksasta pääteemasta ja monista pienemmistä merkityskokonaisuuksista. Pääteemojen ollessa yhdenmukaisia suomalaisten ja kiinalaisten osallistujien kesken, eroavaisuudet nousivat esiin pinnallisempien ala-merkitysten kohdalla. Suomalaisten antamat brändimerkitykset olivat yksityisempiä, subjektiivisempia ja kokemuksellisempia, kun taas kiinalaisten antamat brändimerkitykset olivat sosiaalisempia, objektiivisempia ja utilitaristisempia.

Tutkimustulosten perusteella suomalaisten ja kiinalaisten osallistujien luksusmuotibrändeille antamat brändimerkitykset ovat huomattavasti heterogeenisempiä kuin aiempi tutkimus on osoittanut ja selvästi moniulotteisempia kuin yritysten brändistrategioissaan luomat merkitykset. Tämä osoittaa kuluttajien syvää osallistumista ja omistautumista brändimerkitysten yhteisluomiseen. Tutkimustuloksia hyödyntämällä brändijohtajat voivat kehittää globaaleja brändistrategioita, jotka ottavat huomioon paikalliset eroavaisuudet ja keskittyvät henkilökohtaisesti merkityksellisten brändikokemusten luomiseen.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION 7

1.1 The dynamic world of luxury brands 7
1.2 Problem setting and research questions 9

2 LUXURY BRANDS IN THE WORLD OF MEANINGS 13

2.1 The concept of luxury brands 13
2.1.1 Conceptualizing luxury 13
2.1.2 Different dimensions of luxury brands 16
2.2 The structure and development of brand meanings 19
2.2.1 The semiotic structure of brand meanings 20
2.2.2 Theoretical models of brand meaning development 22
2.3 The interactive transfer of brand meanings 26
2.3.1 Culturally constituted world 26
2.3.1.1 Culture as a social construction of shared meanings 27
2.3.1.2 Culture as a psychological construction of cross-cultural characteristics 29
2.3.1.3 Culture as an economic construction of commercialized symbols 30
2.3.2 Brand as a carrier of cultural meanings 31
2.3.2.1 Brands in use for differentiation 32
2.3.2.2 Brands in use for integration 33
2.3.3 Individual as the co-creator of meanings 34
2.3.3.1 Individual and the extended self 35
2.3.3.2 Brand meanings as part of the self-concept 37
2.4 Synthesis of the theoretical framework 38

3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH 41

3.1 Research philosophy 41
3.1.1 Social constructionist paradigm 41
3.1.2 Ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions 43
3.2 Research strategy 44
3.2.1 Qualitative methodology 45
3.2.2 The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique 46
3.2.3 Data generation 49
3.2.4 Data analysis 53

4 HETEROGENEOUS BRAND MEANINGS FOR LUXURY FASHION BRANDS 55

4.1 Consensus map of consumers' meanings for luxury fashion brands 55
4.1.1 Pursuing hedonistic pleasure 57
4.1.2 Daydreaming and fantasy world 59
4.1.3 Appreciating beauty, art and quality 61
4.1.4 Driving force in life 63
4.1.5 Connecting and expressing the self 66
4.1.6 Seeking connectedness to others 69
4.1.7 Matter of investment 72

4.1.8 Valuing sustainability 74
4.2 Conclusions and re-evaluation of the theoretical framework 77
4.2.1 The differences and similarities between the meanings for luxury fashion brands among Finnish and Chinese consumers 77
4.2.2 The role of socio-cultural factors in the construction of meanings for luxury fashion brands 80
4.2.3 Re-evaluation of the theoretical framework 82

5 SUMMARY 86

5.1 Summary of the research 86
5.2 Theoretical contribution of the research 90
5.3 Practical implications of the research 93
5.4 Evaluating the research quality 95
5.5 Further research directions 99

REFERENCES 101

APPENDICES 111

APPENDIX 1: E-mail invitation and instructions for the informant A to take part in the study 111
APPENDIX 2: Examples of the images in ZMET interviews 112

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Different dimensions of luxury brands 19
Figure 2: The binary structure of signs in semiotics 21
Figure 3: Peirce's triadic model of the components of meaning 22
Figure 4: Environments influencing brand meaning development 23
Figure 5: A framework for brand meaning development 24
Figure 6: Movement of meaning 25
Figure 7: Cultural components of brand meanings as viewed in this study 27
Figure 8: Private self, identities and public self as different layers of the self-concept 36
Figure 9: Synthesis of the theoretical framework 39
Figure 10: Consensus map of consumers' meanings for luxury brands 56
Figure 11: Collective themes and different sub-meanings between Finnish and Chinese respondents 78
Figure 12: The re-evaluation of the synthesis of the theoretical framework 85
Figure 13: Collective themes and corresponding deep metaphors 90
Figure 14: Contribution continuum 93

LIST OF TABLES:

Table 1: Luxury brand dimensionality in academic literature 18
Table 2: Respondents of the study 51
Table 3: Meanings attached to "Pursuing hedonistic pleasure" theme 59
Table 4: Meanings attached to "Daydreaming and fantasy world" theme 61
Table 5: Meanings attached to "Appreciating beauty, art and quality" theme 63
Table 6: Meanings attached to "Driving force in life" theme 65
Table 7: Meanings attached to "Connecting and expressing the self" theme 69
Table 8: Meanings attached to "Seeking connectedness to others" theme 72
Table 9: Meanings attached to "Matter of investment" theme 74
Table 10: Meanings attached to "Valuing sustainability" theme 77

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The dynamic world of luxury brands

Luxury is a necessity that begins where necessity ends.
(Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel, 1883–1971)

The market for luxury goods is continuing to grow globally, despite macroeconomic uncertainty. In the year 2014, according to the luxury goods industry's leading market research firm, Bain & Company, worldwide sales of personal luxury goods are on target to reach 223 billion euros, a growth rate of five percent (Bain & Company 2014). The number of luxury goods consumers has more than tripled in 20 years, to around 330 million people, with more than 10 million new customers entering the market each year (Economist 2014). The growth is mainly driven by changing socio-economic and demographic factors in the global environment (Christodoulides, Michaelidou & Li 2009, 395). While Europe has been the clear leader in luxury consumption for centuries, the main drivers of growth are now coming from the rising middle class of the emerging markets, such as Brazil, India, Russia and China (The Business of Fashion 2013).

With luxury consumption in the Asia-Pacific region expected to grow 170 percent over the next five years, this geographical area now represents the biggest luxury market (The Business of Fashion 2013). While other emerging countries, such as India, Malaysia and Indonesia, are important contributors in this region, the growth is predominantly due to the Chinese middle class, which is increasingly brand aware and willing to invest in luxury brands (Li, Li & Kambele 2011, 1516). The importance of Chinese luxury consumers is further fueled by growing tourism. Bain & Company (2014) estimated that last year Chinese consumers purchased 47 percent of all the luxury purchases worldwide, spending three times more on luxury purchases abroad than they spent locally. Today, Chinese consumers represent the top and fastest-growing nationality for luxury.

With new customers entering the market each year and existing customers becoming more loyal to their favorite brands, market revenues for luxury goods are about to grow worldwide as much as 50 percent faster than global GDP (Bain & Company 2014). In the longer run,

Bain & Company (2014) estimates that the global luxury market in 2025 is likely to be more than five times the size it was in 1995. When the figures are only growing and the field is expanding like never before, it is reasonable to ask, "What is the core concept of luxury, and what makes it so alluring to people all over the world?"

When the fashion design icon Coco Chanel stated that "Luxury is a necessity that begins where necessity ends", she was talking about the same conception as the notable academic writer T.B. Veblen (1899) was studying around the same time. Veblen was the first to describe the consumption of luxury goods as a "conspicuous waste." In his seminal text *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, he argued that people used the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods to signal wealth, power and status (Berthon, Pitt, Parent & Berthon 2009, 45). Since then, academic researchers and practitioners alike have been echoing the idea behind Chanel's and Veblen's definitions: that we do not need luxury goods to survive as human beings, but we need luxury goods to satisfy our natural human craving to feel beautiful, important and recognized (Okonkwo 2007, 7).

Our society thrives on consumption and material possessions as forms of identity and expression. Sydney Levy stated in his groundbreaking paper, "Symbols for Sale" (1959), that "people do not buy products just for what they do, but also for what they mean." The important role of brands in contemporary consumer cultures can be considered as the embodiment of the immaterial world (Turunen & Laaksonen 2011, 468). We use brands to send messages to others about who we are and what we are like (Berger 2010, 77). On the one hand, brands separate and differentiate us from others; on the other hand, they integrate us into the society and into the subcultures with which we share similar tastes (Chan, Berger & Boven 2012, 561). Thus, when people buy a luxury item, they are buying not just the product, but a complete package that comprises the product and a set of intangible benefits that appeal to emotional, social and psychological levels of their being (Okonkwo 2007, 2). These are the benefits that people are looking for when they buy their Gucci bags, Louis Vuitton scarfs, or Jimmy Choo sandals.

There is a level at which these brands are universal – if not, they would never achieve strong equity across different markets – but there is also a level at which the cultural factors lead consumers to interpret these brands differently (Oswald 2012, 196). Luxury brands are now facing the diversity of the world and the various interpretations of their multicultural

consumers. For example, Chinese luxury consumption may not follow the trends of the Western world, since Chinese perceive luxury brands in terms of their unique cultural backgrounds (Li et al. 2011, 1516). Since globalization makes luxury brands readily available in diverse cultural contexts, these brands are now facing the challenge of finding a balance in the special characteristics of each of their markets (Okonkwo 2007, 4).

Luxury is – and has always been – a major sociological issue in any society (Kapferer & Bastien 2012, 8). The authors state that it is society that defines what luxury is. Therefore it is suggested that luxury brands should be analyzed in their sociological and cultural context. There is a deep repertoire of meanings for luxury brands, in terms of their use, the socio-psychological nature of their consumers and the cultures to which these consumers belong (Batey 2008, 6). To understand these symbolic meanings more thoroughly, there is a shift under way in brand management from the traditional "features and benefits" mentality to strategies based on "what a product offers and what it means to its customers" (Solomon 2003 in Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 5). In line with this stream of research, this thesis is concerned with the meanings and symbols of luxury fashion brands and how they are constructed in the customers' culture. The nature of brand meanings is dynamic and changing over time, so to be able to modify and renew those meanings, academics and practitioners must understand how the meanings evolve in contemporary consumer cultures.

1.2 Problem setting and research questions

> *Just because many of the products are the same in Asian and Western societies does not mean that consumers buy them for the same reasons, or that the products have the same social functions in each society. Material items can be easily moved or copied, but their meanings are difficult to transfer across cultures.* (Wong & Ahuvia 1998, 1)

Existing research has explored many aspects of luxury branding, but some areas of this field of study are ripe for further exploration. First of all, much of the luxury brand literature has taken a managerial perspective and neglected the consumer point of view (Tynan, McKechnie & Chhuon 2010; Shukla & Purani 2011; Roper, Caruana, Medway & Murphy, 2013). The research topics cover a variety of areas: the nature and definition of luxury goods (see Vigneron & Johnson 2004; Vickers & Renand 2003; Tynan et al. 2010), the competitive

structure of luxury markets (see Chadha & Husband 2006), issues relating to the democratization of luxury (see Silverstein & Fiske 2003), market segmentation (see Dubois, Czellar & Laurent 2005), conspicuous consumption (see Veblen 1899, Shukla 2010) and counterfeiting (see Bian & Veloutsou 2007, Turunen & Laaksonen 2011), just to mention few of the main ones. In spite of this broad literature on the luxury market, the field needs more theoretical understanding about the meanings of luxury brands and how they are constructed in and through the culture.

A specific stream of research under consumer behavior, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), has been trying to break away from the managerial focus of the branding literature, by examining consumption from the cultural perspective (Cayla & Eckhardt 2008, 226; Joy & Li 2012, 142). CCT is a family of theoretical perspectives, studying the dynamic relationships among the consumers' actions, the marketplace and the cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 868). Each research area under CCT provides a unique lens through which to study consumption behavior: (a) *consumer identity projects,* (b) *marketplace cultures,* (c) *the socio-historical patterning of consumption* and (d) *mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies* (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 871; Joy & Li 2012, 143). This thesis aims to open up new possibilities to understand global consumer cultures and shows relevance on several research areas (e.g., Cayla & Eckhardt 2008, Cayla & Arnould 2008). Although this thesis can be placed under the CCT umbrella, CCT is used here merely to refer to the interpretive and cultural nature of the study, and to offer theoretical concepts, but not too much as a single theory or a restricting dogma (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 868).

Second, quantitative research methodologies have been dominating contemporary research on luxury consumption. Many of the consumer researchers subscribe to logical empiricism as a philosophy of science and are thus concerned with studying mental constructs with regard to consumer behavior rather than experiential aspects of actual consumption (Bengtsson 2002, 38). Philosophically, this thesis is interpretive and based on the social constructionist paradigm that, contrary to logical empiricism, argue that reality is constructed and mentally perceived by individuals, and that knowledge is created in social situations (Hudson & Ozanne 1988 in Bengtsson 2002, 38). Methodologically, this research adopts the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to analyze the data generated through people's metaphoric expressions with the semiotic tools (Zaltman 1997, 424). The research is likely to

produce rich descriptions about the brand meanings consumers attach to luxury fashion brands and to identify how these meanings are affected by different cultural frameworks.

Third, the increasingly global nature of the luxury business calls for cross-cultural studies addressing the issue of luxury consumption (Shukla & Purani 2011, 1417). Most of the current research in this area focuses on luxury consumption occurring in the West, usually in one country and one culture at a time, but when it comes to Asia, few academic studies have examined the subject from a sociological or business perspective (Chadha & Husband 2011, 5). Moreover, most studies adopting the cross-cultural setting concentrate on debates about standardization versus adaptation or similar questions, although they should focus more on understanding how consumers interpret and perceive the symbolic brands in different cultural environments (Cayla & Eckhardt 2008, 217). Consumers' reactions to luxury brands often reflect their cultural frameworks, which means that brand managers, as well as academics, should be aware of the differential effects that diverse cultural backgrounds pose for the luxury brands and consumers' perceptions. The driving forces behind luxury consumption in emerging countries are quite different from the drivers in the West (Choo, Moon, Kim & Yoon 2012, 82).

Fourth, Penaloza and Venkatesh (2006, 311) recommend that researchers should study markets as social constructions and examine the multiple perspectives of meaning which create value for the customer. In this thesis, the luxury market is examined as a social construction, and luxury brands are seen as a bundle of meanings, co-created by their customers. The socio-cultural dimension is added into the research setting, and the role of cultural factors in the meaning making process is examined. By using the ZMET method, it is possible to elicit the meanings that consumers are unconsciously constructing in their minds and recognize the metaphors consumers are using when talking about different brands. In the empirical part, Finland and China are chosen as the countries of focus, because they represent good examples of individualistic (Finland) and collectivist (China) cultures (Hofstede 1991). The analysis of brand meanings associated with luxury fashion brands within these two cultures may uncover both similarities and differences between the cultures, and thus it provides an appealing setting for adding understanding within this field.

The purpose of the research is to describe and analyze how young female luxury consumers construct meanings for luxury fashion brands in Finland and in China. To achieve this purpose, the research has two research questions:

1. What kind of brand meanings do young female luxury consumers attach to luxury fashion brands in Finland and in China?
2. How do the cultural and social factors contribute to the construction of these meanings in these two countries?

In this thesis, a luxury consumer is understood as a person who consumes the luxury item, not only one who buys the product. The target group, in which this research is most interested, comprises young female adults, 20–35 years old. Consumers for luxury brands are relatively younger in Asia; in most Asian markets, the biggest spenders on luxury brands are young women between the ages of 20 and 30 (Chadha & Husband 2011, 5), which is why this age group was chosen as the most relevant one for this study. Based on observations the researcher has made herself in Finland, the average age for luxury fashion consumers there is slightly higher, which is why the upper limit was raised into 35 years. The meanings are not studied among the whole demographic group of young women, but among the group of young female luxury consumers who actually consume luxury brands.

While everything from champagne to caviar and from high-end hotels to sports cars can be defined as luxury, this thesis is concentrating only on "luxury brands on your person" (Chadha & Husband 2011, 3) or "luxury fashion brands" as stated here. This is partly because in Asia, and especially in China, the phenomenon of luxury is one of wearing luxury brands on your person, not about luxurious living – not yet, at least. Another reason is that from the semiotic point of view, some products are more important for people as a means of forming and expressing their identity, such as fashion accessories and ready-to-wear clothes (Berger 2010, 81). Fashion items have many functions in the ways we make sense of ourselves and other people, which is why they form an interesting category for study.

As the aim of this thesis is to achieve a deep understanding of the topic, the study is focused on examining the brand meanings only from the consumers' point of view; the company perspective is left out of the study.

2 LUXURY BRANDS IN THE WORLD OF MEANINGS

2.1 The concept of luxury brands

Although Kapferer and Bastien (2012) suggest that luxury is as old as humanity, and although there are a number of fairly well-established definitions of what a brand is, there is no corresponding agreement in the academic literature on what defines a luxury brand (Berthon et al. 2009; Christodoulides et al. 2009; Tynan et al. 2010; Shukla & Purani 2011). To gain a deeper understanding of the essence of a luxury brand and its dimensionality, it is necessary first to take a look at the concept of luxury itself.

2.1.1 Conceptualizing luxury

Luxury is a culture that is deeply rooted in human nature and originated far back in our history. Kapferer and Bastien (2012, 6) suggest that luxury was already an important part of life in ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Chinese and Amerindian societies. Typical for these civilizations were the organized form of society, the leading groups and the objects, symbols and lifestyles associated with the leading groups. Luxury was found in extraordinary commodities, such as pearls, crystal, perfumes and spices – all things available only for the privileged (Berthon et al. 2009, 46). The concept of "luxury" reflects this preferential setting. The Latin word *luxus* means "extras of life," "extravagant living," or "sinful self-indulgence" (Christodoulies & Li 2009, 397). These definitions reveal the negative, even depraved, side of luxury, which was the prevailing view of the concept for a very long time. Sekora (1977, 128) echoes this by saying "The concept of luxury is one of the oldest, most important, and most pervasive negative principles for organizing society Western history has known."

Luxury was – and is still – seen as divisive (Berry 1994, 63). It has been the subject of constant debate between two opposing views. Some commentators consider luxury to be socially polarizing. Luxury is seen as conspicuous consumption of luxury goods that people use to signal wealth, power and status. Some commentators even consider luxury an enemy of virtue and a betrayal of community values (Berthon et al. 2009, 45). However, in the 17th century its more positive meanings started to emerge, and people recognized it as a powerful

driver of artistic and technical discoveries that gradually spread throughout society and eventually benefit everyone (Kapferer & Bastien 2012, 7). Proponents of luxury associate it with the struggle for betterment and see it as an aspirational and improving force in society (Berry 1994, 40; Kapferer & Bastien 2012, 8). From an economic point of view, luxury is one of the growth drivers in the free market, as people aspire to luxurious way of living (Berthon et al. 2009, 46).

Today, academics talk about the "democratization of luxury," a phenomenon resulting from structural and cultural shifts in capitalist markets, which make the luxury category accessible to almost everyone (Roper et al. 2013, 376). These new-luxury goods can generate high volumes despite their relatively high prices, because while commanding a premium over conventional products, they are priced well below old-luxury goods (Silverstein & Fiske 2003, 50). Silverstein and Fiske find this kind of luxury in the "sweet spot between mass and class." According to the authors, even when these products usually address basic necessities, they evoke and engage consumers' emotions while feeding their aspirations for a better life. However, this mass-prestige, also termed "masstige," carries with it a risk of vulgarization (Kapferer & Bastien 2012, 11), and certainly, when the phenomenon spreads to wider sectors, it has direct implications on how we will define luxury in the future.

One way to conceptualize luxury, from the sociological and economic point of view, is to adopt the model that Adam Smith (1776) used to classify consumption (Berthon et al. 2009, 46). Smith divided consumption into four categories: *necessary* – to maintain life; *basic* – for normal growth and prosperity; *affluence* – goods that are not essential for growth and prosperity; and *luxury* – goods that are in limited supply, difficult to procure and very expensive. Many authors (see Kemp 1998, 591) have also borrowed the well-known *hierarchy of needs*, devised by Abraham Maslow (1970), to explain the essence of luxury. Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs, ranging from basic physiological needs to needs of self-actualization. The pertinent notion in this model is that, once the basic needs have been materially satisfied, the more culturally meaningful aspects of consumption start to prevail, and people become increasingly concerned with the more symbolic meanings of goods (Batey 2002, 13). Consumption of luxury goods is one way to satisfy needs related to *esteem* or *self-actualization* in the hierarchy. Most of the developed countries and mature consumer cultures are now operating at the top of the pyramid.

Despite the seemingly constant nature of basic human needs (as suggested by Maslow's hierarchy), perceptions of what is luxury and what is necessity vary within different societies and cultures (Kemp 1998, 592). Christodoulides and Li (2009, 397) illustrate this by suggesting "what is regarded as a basic car in a developed country may be viewed as a luxury car in a developing one." Also, Berry (1994, 40) stressed that the socio-economic environment has a fundamental effect on whether particular commodities are considered luxuries or necessities. Although the status of goods as luxuries is partly determined by social, economic and political aspects of each society, the interpretations of luxury are extremely subjective in any society (Berthon et al. 2009, 47). What might be luxury to one person will be commonplace, or perhaps even irrelevant, to another. Moreover, these perceptions can change within the same person in different times (Wiedmann, Hennigs & Siebels 2007, 11). Berry (1994, 12) suggests that the same good might be differently considered as a luxury or a necessity, depending on the state of mind of the person wanting the good. This means that even subjective luxury perceptions can vary from one occasion to another.

The term "luxury" is routinely used in our everyday life to refer to products, services, or a certain lifestyle – often, however, without a clear understanding of the luxury concept (Wiedmann et al. 2007, 11). Philosophical thinking in the West is based on binary thinking; we structure the world in terms of dialectical pairs and contrasts (Batey 2002, 198). Saussure suggests that we only know what a concept means by knowing what it does not mean, and more particularly, by knowing its opposite (Berger 2010, 8). The luxury concept in this thesis is also based on the binary structure of meaning, or the opposition of poles (Batey 2008, 199). The *luxury-necessity* dimension is not the only relevant one (see Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry 1989 and their "sacred-profane" distinction), but it is an important one for society (Kemp 1998, 592). According to Berry (1994, 12), "whereas necessities are utilitarian objects that relieve an unpleasant state of discomfort, luxuries are characterized as objects of desire that provide pleasure and as non-essential items or services that contribute to luxurious living; an indulgence or convenience beyond the indispensable minimum." Today, these objects of desire are mostly prestigious, well-known, global brands that satisfy many different dimensions of customers' needs.

2.1.2 Different dimensions of luxury brands

Academic perspectives on brand luxury have identified that consumers can typically define luxury by listing what they consider to be luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Hermes, Chanel, etc. (Roper et al. 2013, 376). However, many of these consumers may have difficulty identifying what makes these brands luxurious. This vagueness of luxury brands holds true not only for the consumers, but also for the academics. Although there is still little agreement in the academic literature on what constitutes a luxury brand (Christodoulies & Li 2009, 397), certain extrinsic and intrinsic features that are commonly attached to luxury brands can be found and categorized into different dimensions of luxury brands.

According to Tynan et al. (2010, 1157), academics are using "luxury" in different ways. Economists define luxury goods as goods for which demand increases either in proportion with income or in greater proportion than income. Nueno and Quelch (1998, 61) describe luxury brands as "those whose ratio of functionality to price is low, while the ratio of intangible and situational utility to price is high." In addition, the concept of exclusivity and rarity is well documented in the luxury literature (Wiedmann et al. 2007, 2). Catry (2003, 48 in Tynan et al. 2010, 1157) argues for the possible replacement of actual rarity, once considered essential to the existence of a luxury good, by the notion of perceived scarcity maintained through rare ingredients or special strategies, such as limited editions.

In examining the motivation for consumers to buy luxury brands, many researchers (Leibenstein 1950; Shukla 2010) refer to Veblen's (1899) findings, which proposed that luxury is about a wealthy leisure class engaging in conspicuous consumption, purchasing high-priced items in order to ostentatiously communicate wealth and achieve social status. Although these aforementioned perspectives are pervasive in the contemporary literature, they fail to appreciate the cultural and emotional complexity of luxury brands, assuming that consumers are motivated solely by the need to signify status via rare, high-priced luxury goods. (Roper at al. 2013, 377)

Instead of narrowly associating luxury with economic or prestige motives, there has been a call for integrative perspective on luxury brands (Berthon et al. 2009, 47; Tynan et al. 2010, 1157; Shukla & Purani 2012, 1418; Roper et al. 2013, 377). Vigneron and Johnson (2004) classify two major dimensions of luxury value perception: personal perceptions (hedonic

value and extended self) and non-personal perceptions (conspicuousness, uniqueness and quality). Wiedmann et al. (2007) extend this framework by using four dimensions: social, functional, individual, and financial value. Smith and Golgate (2007) propose a similar approach with symbolic/expressive, utilitarian/functional, experiential/hedonic and cost/sacrifice values. Tynan et al. (2010) divide symbolic value into two sub-dimensions: self-directed and other-directed. Vickers and Renand (2003) differentiate between luxury and non-luxury brands in three dimensions: functionalism, experientialism and symbolic interactionism. Berthon et al. (2009) also conceptualize luxury goods with similar value-based dimensions: the objective (material), the subjective (individual) and the collective (social).

Previous discussion highlights three important indicators of luxury dimensions. First, luxury brands have a strong symbolic dimension that includes both the self and others. Second, the experiential dimension is relating luxury to pleasure, emotions and sensory stimulation. Thirdly, luxury goods are associated with greater quality and functionality and also with higher price. Based on these indicators argued in the contemporary literature, three dimensions of luxury brand are suggested: *symbolism*, *experientialism* and *functionality*. These dimensions are in line with frameworks developed by Vickers and Renand (2003) and Berthon et al. (2009). Table 1 serves to locate the existing writing within this field and shows the reclassification of luxury brand dimensionality. It can be seen from Table 1 that evidence exists for luxury brand definitions from each of these three brand perspectives. However, according to Berthon et al. (2010, 47), these dimensions should be handled together, rather than separately, which is why they are combined into one single framework.

The symbolic dimension is the realm of social collective (Berthon et al. 2009, 48). It has two aspects: the self-directed symbolic value and the other-directed symbolic value (Tynan et al. 2010, 1158). Brands scoring high on symbolic dimension are designed to associate the owner with a desired group, role, or self-image (Vickers & Renand 2003). The experiential dimension is the realm of individual subjective value (Berthon et al. 2009, 48). Luxury brands with a strong experiential dimension aim to satisfy intrinsic needs with regard to sensory stimulation, hedonic pleasure and variety seeking (Vickers & Renand 2003). Finally, the functional dimension refers to the core material benefits and basic utilities, such as superior quality, uniqueness, usability, reliability and durability (Wiedmann et al. 2007, 4).

Table 1. Luxury brand dimensionality in academic literature (adapted from Smith & Colgate 2007; Tynan et al. 2010)

Dimensions of luxury brand	Theoretical views	Theoretical sources
Symbolic	Conspicuous consumption; bandwagon, snob and Veblen effects; perfectionism effect; signs; status; esteem; prestige; social identity; personal identity; uniqueness; extended self	Veblen (1899); Leibenstein (1950); Levy (1957); Belk (1988); Kapferer (1997); Holbrook (1999); Vigneron & Johnson (1999), (2004); Vickers & Renand (2003); O'Cass & McEwen (2004); Okonkwo (2009)
Experiential	Hedonic effect; aesthetics; sensory pleasure; experience; emotions; feelings; variety seeking	Hirschman & Holbrook (1982); Pine & Gilmore (1998); Fournier (1998); Holbrook (1999); Vigneron & Johnson (1999), (2004); Christodoulides et al (2009)
Functional	Excellence; craftsmanship; quality; premium price	Holbrook (1999); Atwal & Williams (2009); Christodoulides et al. (2009); Keller (2009)

To understand these three defining facets of luxury brands more deeply, the "Three Worlds Model" of Popper is introduced in Figure 1. Popper defined the First World as the realm of physical objects, which can be seen as representing material goods and services. The Second World is the domain of subjective experience, such as thoughts, perceptions, needs and wants. The Third World is constituted from the culture: objective knowledge, collective narratives, symbols and images. In Figure 1, the three worlds hypothesis of Popper is integrated with the three dimensions of luxury brands to represent the world of luxury brand meanings (Popper 1975; Berthon et al. 2009, 47).

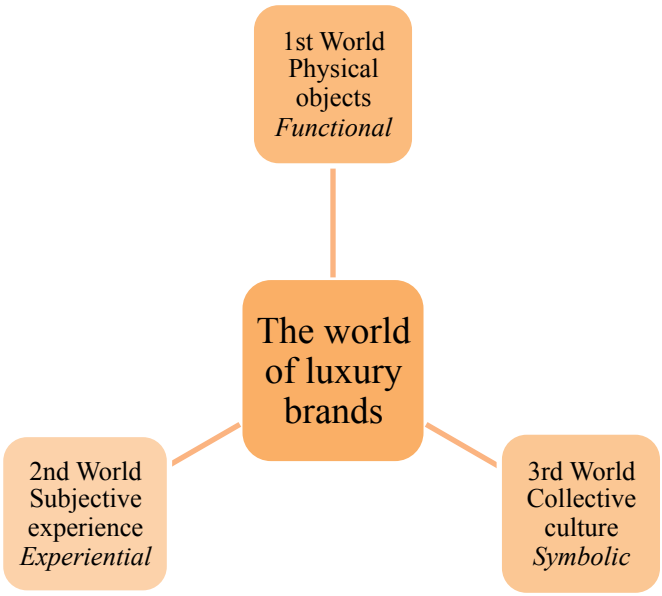

Figure 1. Different dimensions of luxury brands (Adapted from Popper 1975; Berthon et al. 2009, 47)

The "Three Worlds Model" highlights the relationships among the product, the user and the context. (Berthon et al. 2009, 47) For example, a Louis Vuitton bag might have a very unique design with extremely good quality leather and practical usability (First World), but it becomes a brand only when attached to certain symbolic characteristics, having value for the reference group, but also to the user itself (Third World), while representing different brand meanings for different customers (Second World).

2.2 The structure and development of brand meanings

As was shown above, consumers are not as functionally oriented as had been thought by prior research; they pay more attention to the symbolic and experiential dimensions of brands and consumption (see Veblen 1899; Levy 1959; Holbrook & Hirschman 1982; Solomon 1983; Belk 1988; Belk et al.1989; Dittmar 1992). Baudrillard (1968, 2006) took this thinking to the extremes and suggested that we no longer consume goods but only signs. However, as Bengtsson (2002, 39) notes: "Symbolic consumption should not be interpreted to mean that functional values of goods are unimportant or irrelevant today." Still, one has to be able to carry items inside her Chanel bag or, at least theoretically, to walk in her Manolos. Goods still perform functionally, but it is the brand's meaning which makes the product personally

meaningful and relevant for the consumer (Bengtsson, 2002, 40). Despite the increasing attention paid to symbolism in the context of consumption, the field needs more theoretical understanding about brand meanings, their structure and how they are constructed in the marketplace.

2.2.1 The semiotic structure of brand meanings

The nature of meaning has been debated since the time of Plato and Aristotle. Philosophers, logicians, linguists and semioticians have all struggled with this elusive topic (Batey 2008, 77). Now marketers and consumer researchers are also entering this field. Meanings are everywhere, and with their help, we are able to navigate in our everyday lives, instead of regarding everything we see, feel, or experience during the day as new or unprecedented (Fiske 1993, 61). However, because meanings are everywhere, we don't usually notice them. This banal fact demonstrates that the most common things are usually the least known – we live in the middle of meanings, which we have negotiated and contested over time with other people, but we take those meanings for granted, without further reflection (Lehtonen 1996, 13).

However, in the context of marketing and consumer research it is important to understand the cultural meanings of consumer goods and brands, because meanings are at the heart of consumer behavior (Batey 2008, xiii). Brand meanings permeate much of consumers' lives in various ways. We are surrounded by a plethora of meanings, ensconced in housing, clothing and products of media, marketing and advertising (Mick & Oswald 2006, 31). Brand meanings are one of the most significant signs we – as consumers – use in our everyday lives to construct our identities, to communicate our self-concepts and to interpret messages sent by other consumers and companies alike.

The consumer world consists of different meanings formed from signs and symbols that are tied to their cultural space and time (Mick & Oswald 2006, 42). The basic unit of meaning is a sign, which is regarded as "something that stands for something else, such as a spoken or written word, a drawn figure or a material object unified in the mind with a particular cultural concept" (Berger 2010, 3). Signs are anything that can be used to substitute for something else, so the word "sign" is understood more widely than in spoken language. Signs are not

autonomous entities, which means that no sign has meaning in itself – in order to be understood, signs need someone to interpret them (Lehtonen 1996, 72).

Semiotics is a doctrine of signs that offers tools for examining the structure and interpretation of meanings (Mick & Oswald 2006, 42). From a semiotic perspective, brands are cultural signifiers (Berger 2010, 78). The signifier/signified relationship is structured by codes associating a material signifier (word, image, etc.) with a signified (cultural concept). The relation between these two is arbitrary and based on convention. (Oswald 2012, 10) For example, the meaning of a Louis Vuitton bag is not intrinsic to the object itself, but is codified by habit and convention. The logo is then a sign for the broader world of cultural codes, rituals and consumer experiences, as illustrated in Figure 2 (Oswald 2012, 52). Since the signifier/signified association is ruled by social convention and cultural habit, this relationship is context-related and can change over time (Berger 2010, 5).

Signified	Status, style, wealth
Signifier	Louis Vuitton logo

Figure 2. The binary structure of signs in semiotics (adapted from Oswald 2012, 52)

Another way to examine the components of meaning is to adopt the triadic model of Peirce, which involves three parts: the *sign* (the representamen), the *object* (physical, or mental, to which the representamen refers) and the *interpretant* (a response, reaction, or interpretation) as shown in Figure 3 (Fiske 1993, 63). The two-directional arrows depict that these units are interacting with each other, and one cannot be understood independently without the other two (Seppänen 2001, 177). The model emphasizes the important role of people, society and culture in the process of meaning development through the notion of interpretant (Mick 1986, 198). For example, the meaning of the Louis Vuitton brand can be split up into parts, where the LV monogram is the sign, which refers to the Louis Vuitton handbag – the object, and corresponds to the interpretation of style, wealth and luxurious lifestyle – the interpretant.

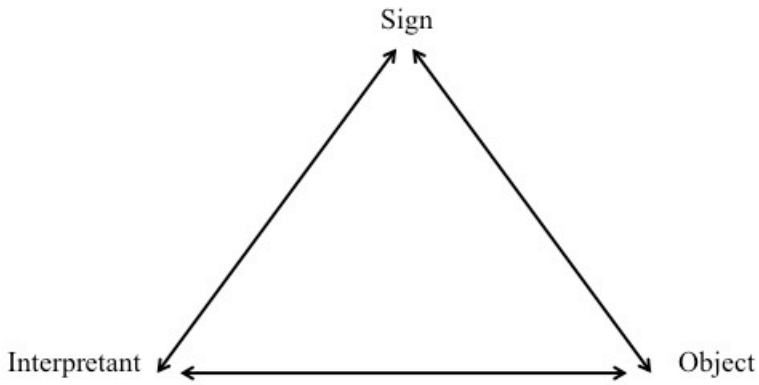

Figure 3. Peirce's triadic model of the components of meaning (adapted from Fiske 1993, 64)

Semiotics was applied here to examine the structure of brand meanings. However, the principal perspectives of semiotics or its implications for consumer research were not studied, since semiotics was borrowed only for its primary purpose, to expose the structure of meanings. (For more about the emergence of semiotics in consumer research, see Mick 1986; Mick & Oswald 2006; Berger 2010; Oswald 2012.) The signifier/signified relationship, developed by Saussure, suggests that meanings have two components: a material signifier (logo, image, the product, etc.) and an abstract signified (the cultural concept). According to Peirce's triadic model, meanings consist of three parts: the sign, the object and the interpretant. Both approaches highlight the role of social and cultural environments, through which the meanings are shaped and perceived. Thus, brands participate in a complex semiotic system linking brand symbolism to cultural codes and personal agendas, structuring the meaning production in the marketplace (Oswald 2012, 54). Researchers have illustrated this process of meaning production differently, emphasizing various actors and environments in the process.

2.2.2 Theoretical models of brand meaning development

How is the meaning of a brand negotiated in the marketplace? Do the marketers instill symbolic meanings into the products from which consumers choose the ones that best correspond to their own self-concepts? Or do consumers take part in the production of meanings for the brands they use, together with the companies and other consumers? In this chapter, the theoretical models of meaning production and movement from Peter and Olson

(2004), Ligas and Cotte (1999) and McCracken (1986) are introduced and discussed. These three models highlight different actors in the process and thus complement each other.

According to Peter and Olson (2004, 382) brand meanings are formed under the influence of stimuli and actors in physical, social and marketing environments. The authors state that the *physical environment* consists of all the non-human physical elements that create the field in which consumer behavior occurs. There are spatial factors such as buildings, streets, stores and other physical objects, and non-spatial elements such as time and temperature. The *social environment* consists of macro level structures such as culture, subcultures and social class, as well as micro level interactions with family, friends and other reference groups. The *marketing environment* includes all the social and physical aspects associated with marketing strategies, such as advertising, promotion and distribution of the brand. These three environments interact with each other and influence the brand meaning development as shown in Figure 4. Although this model illustrates the interactions among different environments, from which brand meanings evolve, it dispels the role of the individual in this process. Moreover, rather than describe the process in itself, it represents the environments influencing the process.

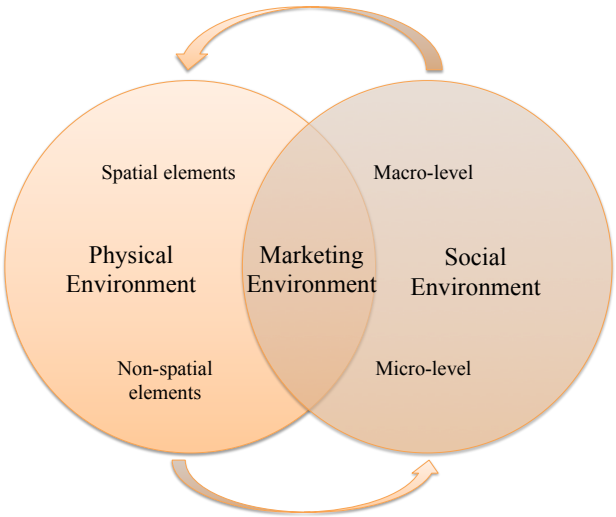

Figure 4. Environments influencing brand meaning development (adapted from Peter & Olson 2004, 384)

In the model of Ligas and Cotte (1999, 611), the individual is taken into account. Authors identify three environments in which the development and transfer of brand meaning takes place as a result of interplay (Figure 5). The *marketing environment* consists of the meanings that develop as a consequence of brand management; it is similar to the one described by Peter and Olson (2004). The meanings rising from the *individual environment* refer to the ways in which consumers wish to be perceived by themselves and by other people through the use of specific products (Ligas & Cotte 1999, 611). Brand meanings are formed as a result of the negotiation in the *social environment,* in which consensus is reached (Aledin 2009, 16). Thus, these three environments interact with one another: consumers negotiate the meanings created in the marketing environment, and interpreted in the individual environment, with the members of their social group in the social environment (Bengtsson 2002, 63).

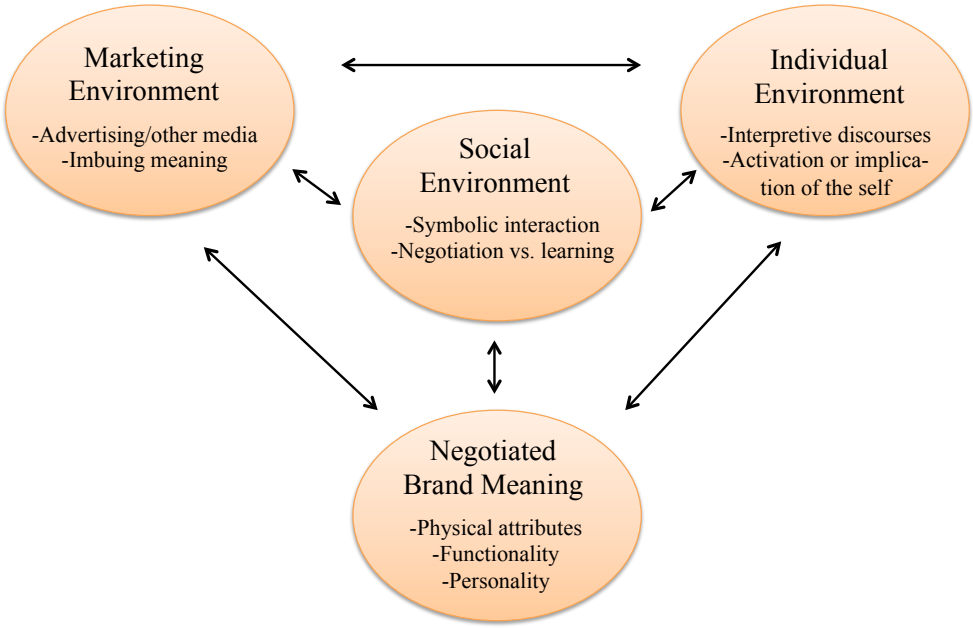

Figure 5. A framework for brand meaning development (adapted from Ligas & Cotte 1999, 611)

Even though the model of Ligas and Cotte (1999, 612) is neither a top-down nor a linear one, they do point out that the meaning for a brand originates from the marketing environment (Bengtsson 2002, 62). Surely, the marketing environment is the one that provides consumers the most information about product benefits and intended meanings for a certain brand, but it is not necessarily the most important one for the consumer. Brand meanings can evolve from personal experiences with the specific brands, for example based on memories from the

consumer's childhood, with ignorance of the marketer's intended meanings. Ligas and Cotte (1999, 612) also argue that consumers must either accept or negotiate the meaning of a brand in a social group in order to communicate effectively, or else search for another social group. However, it is possible that the social group never uncovers possible discrepancies with regard to the various symbolic meanings that the brand represents to the individual consumer (Bengtsson 2002).

McCracken's model (1986, 72) of meaning transfer is probably the most widely used approach in the marketing literature (Batey 2008, 101). In his analysis of meaning movement, McCracken (1986, 71) identifies three main locations of meaning: *culturally constituted world*, *consumer goods* and *individual consumer*. He also identifies two phases of meaning transfer: *world-to-goods* and *goods-to-individual*. This process is illustrated in Figure 6. According to McCracken (1986, 71), cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good through advertising and fashion system. Then the meaning is transferred from the object to an individual consumer through a number of personal rituals, such as possession, exchange, grooming and divestment rituals. Although the model does not include any discussion about the role of brands, McCracken (1993) later notes that cultural meanings located in consumer goods are actually located in the brand rather than in the product.

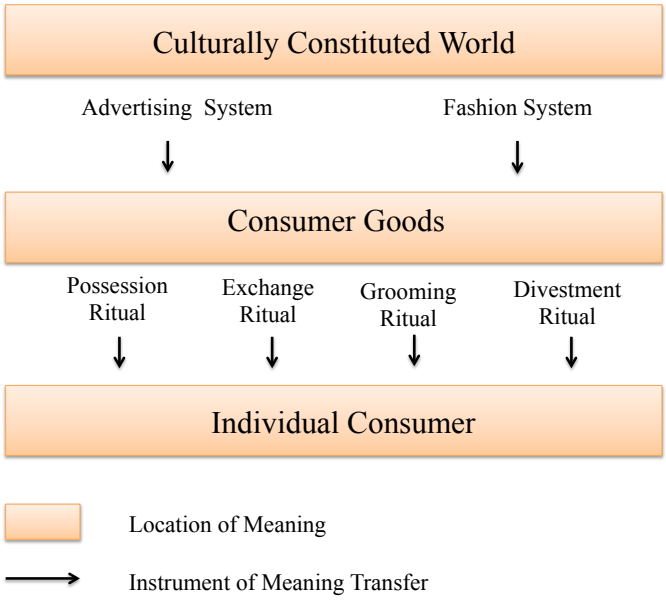

Figure 6. Movement of meaning (adapted from McCracken 1986, 72)

Although McCracken's model has been widely used for its ability to illustrate the primary mechanism for meaning transfer, it has been criticized for assuming that meanings are primarily handed down to consumers by cultural intermediaries (see Rajaniemi 1990; Thompson & Haytko 1997; Ligas & Cotte 1999; Batey 2008; Bengtsson 2002). Rather than characterizing it as a top-down process, where meanings are imposed on consumers, Thompson & Haytko (1997, 38) suggest the more dynamic poststructuralist approach, in which meanings are constructed across diffuse social contexts and structured by multiple consumption objectives. Furthermore, Batey (2008, 102) suggests that individuals are not just passive receivers of meanings, but actively participate in their creation by endowing objects with meanings originating from their own experience, history and social context. So, as Bengtsson (2002, 47) points out, cultural meanings are not simply accepted or rejected but rather reworked by consumers, and therefore the meaning transfer process should be characterized as a diffuse, interactive and consumer-centered undertaking.

2.3 The interactive transfer of brand meanings

The interactive perspective proposes that consumers are using creative ways to combine, adapt, or even create brand meanings to fit their own life goals (Ligas & Cotte 1999, 609). This interactive perspective acknowledges that brand meanings are not perceived similarly by all consumers, but are interpreted personally, linking the brand, the socio-cultural environment and the individual (Holt 1997; Thompson & Haytko 1997; Ligas & Cotte 1999; Batey 2002; Bengtsson 2002). Rather than being characterized as a top-down or linear process, meaning production is considered an interactive undertaking. Meaning is thus always in flux among different elements: the culture, the individual and the object (Rajaniemi 1990 21, Turunen & Laaksonen 2011, 469). None of these constructs can be taken as a separate element or location of meaning (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 8), but they are discussed here one by one to elaborate the characteristics of each concept more deeply.

2.3.1 Culturally constituted world

This thesis is based on the assumption that we live in a culturally constituted world, and that this constitution largely takes place in and through the market (McCracken 1986, 71). Brands are seen as carriers of cultural meanings that are produced through consumption (Moisander

& Valtonen 2006, 10), and it is recognized that these meanings differ between different cultural contexts (Torelli & Aggarwal 2011, 69). To understand the cultural component of brand meanings, the concept of culture is examined from three different perspectives relevant to this study: social constructionism, cross-cultural psychology and consumer culture theory, as illustrated in Figure 7. While representing distinct approaches to the concept of culture, the theoretical orientation ultimately aims to understand the complexity of culture. The key here is to understand culture as a social construction through which meanings are being produced, and to recognize that in consumer cultures this production often takes place in and through the market (Alasuutari 2011, 58; Arnould & Thompson 2005, 868). Because globalization makes luxury brands readily available in diverse cultural contexts, the cross-cultural dimensionality is also discussed (Torelli & Cheng 2011, 2).

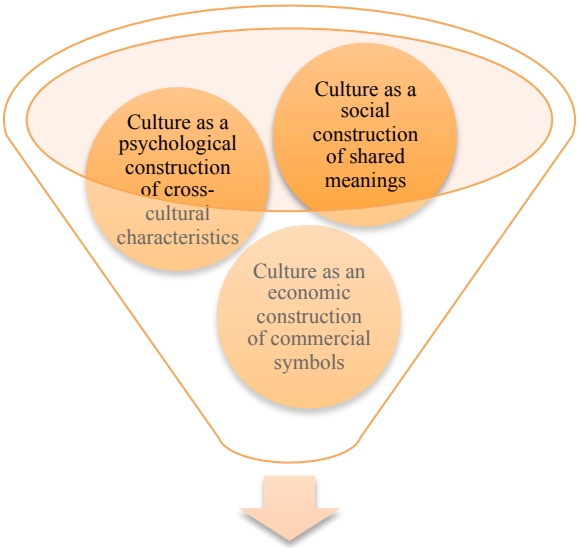

Figure 7. Cultural components of brand meanings as viewed in this study

2.3.1.1 Culture as a social construction of shared meanings

Earlier, culture was seen as a fairly stable, socially integrating system of norms and values that produced social order and controlled the actions taken by the individual or group of individuals (Turunen 2009, 19). However, culture is not an objectified thing or self-enclosed, coherent field of meaning, which guides actions by exerting an influence on individual actors' motivations in the form of norms and values. Instead of producing social order, culture is produced by social interaction (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 8). Thus, by a more recent view,

culture is thought of as a concept of *collective subjectivity*, which means the interactive and dynamic relationship that individuals have with each other and the whole society (Alasuutari 2011, 56). Culture refers to the whole way of life of a community, nation, or social group, which is constantly produced, reproduced, contested, and negotiated in the everyday practices of the members of the culture (Hall 1997, 2). Thus, culture permeates all aspects of human life (Lehtonen 1996, 15).

Culture is not so much a set of things – literature, painting, music and TV programs – as a process, or a set of practices. This cultural turn in social sciences emphasizes the importance of meanings to the definition of culture. On the one hand, culture is produced in the interactions and everyday practices, where meanings are continuously reproduced and changed. On the other hand, culture still constitutes an archive of shared meanings and a whole system of representation that guides and constrains the ways in which people make sense of themselves, others and their everyday lives (Lehtonen 1998, 17; Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 9). Arnould and Thompson (2005, 869) suggest that culture is like a game where individuals improvise within the constraints of rules, making certain patterns of behavior and interpretations more likely than others. These constraints of rules are mostly conveyed through narratives, myths, roles and social practices, and in particular, through the implicit values they involve (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 9).

In any culture, there are always a great diversity of meanings about any topic and many ways to interpret them. Although each of us probably understands and interprets the world in a unique and individual way, when two people belong to the same culture, it means that they make sense of the world in roughly the same way and express themselves in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus, participants of the same culture build up a shared culture of meanings and a social world, which they inhabit together (Hall 1997, 2). So although Moisander and Valtonen (2006, 8) state that culture should not be seen as something to be reduced to a fixed entity such as nationality or ethnicity, culture is produced among members of different social groups, which often, in macro level, means nationalities or ethnic groups. These shared meanings are also called *cultural codes;* some of them are national, others are regional, and others stem from smaller entities such as parts of a city or a family's socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious background (Berger 2010, 22). In this thesis, we regard cultural codes on a national level.

2.3.1.2 Culture as a psychological construction of cross-cultural characteristics

When studying cultural differences in a national level, two models have been widely applied in cross-cultural psychology: the *cultural dimensions theory* (Hofstede 1991) and *Trompenaars' model of national culture differences* (1998) (Schimmack, Oishi & Diener 2005, 17). According to the cultural dimensions theory, cultures differ from each other in five dimensions: power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and long-term orientation. In Trompenaars' model of national culture differences, there are seven dimensions: universalism/particularism, individualism/collectivism, neutral/emotional, specific/diffuse, achievement/ascription, sequential/synchronic and internal/external control (Schimmack et al. 2005, 17). The theoretical mainspring has been the contradistinction between societies described as emphasizing the independence, autonomy and uniqueness of the individual and those described as emphasizing the interdependence, mutual governance and social identity of individuals (Tafarodi, Marshall & Katsura 2004, 786). One empirical focus in this tradition has been comparison of individualistic Western and collectivist Eastern cultures.

There has been a lot of debate about the relevance of the binary conception of culture's symbolic representation of selfhood as predominantly individuating or relational; egocentric or sociocentric; and independent or interdependent (Tafarodi et al. 2004, 787). Critics have demanded narrower theories of culture based on more specific constructs and suggested that the cultural differences in these dimensions are neither as large nor as systematic as often perceived (see the meta-analysis of Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier 2002, 40).

Still, other researchers are showing that these empirically derived cultural domains are still useful in explaining cultural differences between East and West and comparing the effects of social behavior, such as consumption (Wong & Ahuvia 1998; Tafarodi et al. 2004; Schimmack et al. 2005; Shukla & Purani 2011). Especially in explaining the differential perspectives on the concept of the self in Western and Eastern societies, individualism/collectivism has been established as a valid and important dimension (Schimmack et al. 2005, 17). In the context of luxury brand meanings, where the self-concept is highly important, the dimension of individualism/collectivism is clearly relevant. However, since cultures are constantly changing and moving closer to each other, individualism and collectivism are placed in a continuum, rather than considered as bipolar opposites.

It is suggested by prior research that while individualistic societies put the freedoms and aspirations of the individual at their core, collectivist ones are far more group-oriented (Wigley 2006, 38). So, while people in a country like Finland tend to see themselves as highly independent units, in many Asian societies, such as in China, people see themselves as being largely interdependent with others in their group, including family, relatives, friends and co-workers (Shukla & Purani 2011, 1419). Asian self-definitions tend to be constructed more from what others think of them than from what they think of themselves. This cultural difference could he summed up as "me" versus "we" (Wigley 2006, 38).

Cultural orientations have direct and indirect effects on the ways people relate to others and also to their possessions (Shukla 2010, 109). Wong and Ahuvia (1998, 2) note that while Eastern consumers consume the same kinds of status goods, the behavior needs to be understood in light of the specific cultural context. Indeed, although Western individualism has been positively correlated with emphasis on self-gratification, personal achievement, physical attractiveness, material possessions and success (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005), possessions are now playing an increasingly important role also in the collectivist cultures in Asia.

2.3.1.3 Culture as an economic construction of commercialized symbols

Historically, consumer cultures first emerged in the West, but currently, they are spreading from the West to other parts of the world, as former communist countries are turning to capitalism and developing economies are becoming more affluent (Wong & Ahuvia 1998, 1). Stimulated by mass media, tourism and multinational marketing campaigns, consumers worldwide are now acquiring branded goods as part of their life goals (Belk 1988, 147). Consumer culture researchers have suggested that we have entered an era of consumerism, which means that people are no longer considered primarily as citizens or comrades, but as consumers, who use brands and other consumer goods to work on their senses of selves and their identities (Seppänen 2002, 11). Firat and Venkatesh (1995, 239) have suggested that postmodern individuals give meaning to their lives essentially through consumption.

Human beings have always engaged in consumption (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 245). Because people need to eat, be clothed and take care of their other biological needs, consumption has

been a part and parcel of everyone's life in every society and in every culture. But in some societies, people have lived in what is essentially a subsistence economy (usually an isolated agrarian one), in which consumption of material goods has not been an important part of their lives. This can be considered as the total opposite of consumer cultures, in which buying new products and services plays a major role in almost everyone's lives (Berger 2010, 34). CCT researchers define consumer culture as "a social arrangement in which relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets" (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 869).

Thus, today, commercial symbols play a significant role in the production of any culture (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 9). In a postmodern conclusion, culture and economics are closely linked and material production and cultural configurations go solidly hand in hand (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 249). Consumption and production, including marketing, are viewed as essentially cultural phenomena, and brands are seen as cultural products – tangible, public representations of meanings and ideas shared in a culture (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 10; Torelli & Cheng 2011, 2). Unlike other cultural symbols, such as national flags or monuments, brands are commercial entities that are not created to carry cultural meanings, but through social interaction, brands can acquire cultural meanings and become associated with the abstract characteristics that define a specific cultural group (Torelli & Cheng 2011, 5). Thus, brands are considered as carriers of cultural meanings in commercially oriented consumer cultures.

2.3.2 Brand as a carrier of cultural meanings

A meaning turns a product into a brand and manifests the link among the brand, the consumer and the socio-cultural environment (Bengtsson 2002, 51). Meanings are sometimes evident to consumers, sometimes hidden. Some brands are also better able than others to communicate their meanings: publicly consumed (as opposed to privately consumed) products, and luxury (as opposed to necessity) products, can better convey symbolic meanings of the brand and the individual using them (Escalas & Bettman 2005, 380). From the consumer's point of view, there are two occasions in which brand meanings become especially important: differentiation and integration.

Escalas and Bettman (2003, 340) suggest that brands can be used to assert one's individuality and enable one to differentiate herself from other people. Brands can also serve a social purpose by reflecting social ties such as one's family, community and cultural groups. Thus, on the one hand, brands separate and differentiate us from others; on the other hand, they integrate us into society as well as into groups with which we share similar tastes and lifestyles. For the use of luxury brands, both of these functions are evident. One way that elites commonly differentiate themselves from others is through the use of luxury brands; as soon as the masses start to adapt the brands they use, elites reject those brands and search for something new (Berger 2010, 77). This behavior also explains the never-ending cycle of fashion (Solomon et al. 2006, 543). However, an integrating function is also involved, since by using certain luxury brands, people want to belong to the specific groups using those brands. How these two conflicting motives for difference and similarity affect the brand meaning development is examined next.

2.3.2.1 Brands in use for differentiation

People want to feel themselves at least somewhat unique; being too similar to others can generate a negative emotional reaction (Chan et al. 2012, 562). The need to feel different from others arises when individuals feel a threat to their identity, as occurs when they perceive that they are highly similar to others (Tian, Bearden & Hunter 2001, 50). This is especially relevant today, when people share highly similar, urban lifestyles, but still want to perceive themselves as extremely unique.

Individuals may fulfill their desire to be unique in a variety of ways, so they are likely to vary in their tendency to satisfy their uniqueness motivation through consumer behaviors and possessions (Tian et al. 2001, 52). However, in contemporary consumer cultures, consumers acquire and display material possessions, such as brands, for the purpose of feeling differentiated from others, and people with higher needs for uniqueness prefer products and brands that are more scarce or differentiated (Chan et al. 2012, 562). For example, "fashionistas" may select a brand that allows them to communicate a desired social identity (e.g., choosing a brand preferred by an in-group), but they also wish to differentiate within the group (e.g., choosing a less popular product from that brand). Although prior research has focused mainly on consumers diverging from the behaviors of out-group members, differentiation also occurs within groups, as in the example.

Literature identifies two distinct ways in which individuals can differentiate themselves through the use of brands: horizontal and vertical differentiation (Tafarodi, Marshall & Katsura 2004, 790). *Horizontal differentiation* implies achieving distinction within a social group, e.g., business students, by showing preferences for brands, e.g., Globe Hope, which allow for differentiation from typical members of the reference group, based on personality, taste, traits, etc. (Dommer, Swaminathan & Ahluwalia 2013, 658). Because such distinctiveness is not inherently "good" or "bad," it does not, in most cases, convey social superiority or inferiority (Tafarodi et al. 2004, 790). Thus, these horizontal brands are not necessarily associated with higher status within the group. Horizontal brands allow individuals to differentiate themselves from the rest of the group, while still preserving their association with the mainstream group (Dommer et al. 2013, 658).

In turn, vertical differentiation involves selecting brands that confer status or demonstrate one's superiority to others in a reference group (Tafarodi et al. 2004, 790). Vertical differentiation focuses on acquiring distinction through success, status, or position. Because there is a normative perception that more success and status is "better," vertical differentiation implies some sort of social superiority. Vertical brands are likely to be highly desirable and signal status, and they are somewhat uncommon for the reference group; for example, Chanel in the context of business students (Dommer et al. 2013, 659). In many cases, luxury brands are seen as vertical brands, since they are consistent with the group, but still atypical because of their exclusive nature.

2.3.2.2 Brands in use for integration

Although brands can be used to assert one's individuality and uniqueness, consumers often use brands because they aspire to integrate and affiliate with a social group (Rajaniemi 1990, 11). People tend to behave similarly and make choices that are consistent with positive reference groups to construct or express desired identities (Escalas & Bettman 2005, 379). In contemporary consumer cultures, consumption gains symbolic meaning as a marker of group membership (Chan et al. 2012, 562), and reference group usage of a brand provides user image associations and psychological benefit associations for brands (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Escalas & Bettman 2003). It has been thought that people are using luxury brands to differentiate themselves from others and to make themselves feel unique, but it is now suggested that postmodern consumers are more and more looking for these brands because of

their ability to link these consumers to others, to a community and to a tribe (Cova 1997, 311).

Tribes, in a postmodern society, can be seen as groupings of individuals who have an ability to read, interpret and understand the symbolism of the common signs used by the tribe members. Tribes are not held together through executive powers or tribal rules, but through shared emotions, experiences, lifestyles and consumption practices. They exist in no other form but the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members (Cova 1997, 301). When the symbolism is based around a certain brand, tribes or groupings are called *brand communities* (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, 412). According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, 412), a brand community is "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand." Brand communities have an active and important function in the social construction of the brand, especially in the brand meaning development, since brand meanings are socially negotiated within these communities. Moreover, brand communities provide meanings via the associations other consumers have with that group and its members (Escalas & Bettman 2005, 378).

Brand communities are an ultimate example of the groupings in which the branded product is at the center of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, 412). Besides brand communities, or tribes, other reference groups can also be critical sources of brand meanings. Escalas and Bettman (2005, 379) suggest that consumers are likely to accept meanings from brands consistent with an in-group and reject meanings associated with an out-group. Tafarodi et al. (2004, 786) embrace separation along with attachment, arguing that the opposing motives are in fact mutually supportive and that fulfillment of both is required for healthy development and well-being. People want to stand out from the masses, not to be alone, but to belong to a group of individual people (Cova 1997, 310). In this way, both functions of brand use, differentiation and integration, are linked to the brand meanings. In both of these functions, there is an underlying willingness to select brands with meanings relevant to the current self-concept or ideal self of the individual.

2.3.3 Individual as the co-creator of meanings

To understand how things such as brands become meaningful to consumers, it is important to acknowledge that consumers' statements of brand meanings should be understood as self-

interpretations where marketer-induced viewpoints are continuously reworked and customized through the cultural context to fit into the consumers' lives (Bengtsson 2002, 45). This means that people are not passively adopting the meanings, but are actively creating meanings for the products and brands they use (Batey 2008, xiii). However, we live in a world full of duties and responsibilities, so it is interesting to ask why we, as consumers, are willing to invest our time in creating meanings for the brands we use, when we have so much other things to do in our lives. Do we really need brands and products to express ourselves to others, and to remind ourselves of who we are, where we have come from and where we are going?

2.3.3.1 Individual and the extended self

It is typical for consumer cultures that our possessions constitute an important aspect of our sense of self (Bengtsson 2002, 44). In contemporary consumer cultures, consumption is facilitating us to construct our identities, whereby "we are what we consume" (Solomon 2003, 44). This role of consumption in shaping identities is the consequence of the fragmented consumer of postmodernity, whose sense of self is no longer conceived as a unified construction, driven by well-defined, purposeful and rational needs (Gurrieri & Cherrier 2011, 360). In the late 20th century, the Western world was confronted with a cultural revolution, exploding the traditional ties through which individuals were connected to each other and their communities. Value systems, customs and habits were scattered, and people were left searching for other ways to construct their sense of being (Lehtonen 1996, 17). Through the rapid increase in consumption possibilities, consumption activities and their symbolic meanings quickly took their places in people's identity formation (Solomon et al. 2006, 519).

Today, the act of consumption serves to produce a desired self through the images and styles of one's possessions (Belk 1988, 144). To understand why we are using these possessions as the *extended self* (Belk 1988, 139), it is necessary to look at the concepts of self and identity. Numerous definitions are used in social sciences and consumer research to refer to these concepts (Aledin 2009, 17). Weigert, Teitge and Teitge (1986, 57) distinguish between the self and identity by suggesting that an individual has one *self* that becomes situationally defined through a variety of *identities* that are constructed and negotiated through social processes. Solomon (2004, 150) has illustrated the relations between these concepts by

dividing the self into an inner, private self and an outer, public self and placing identity between these concepts (Figure 8).

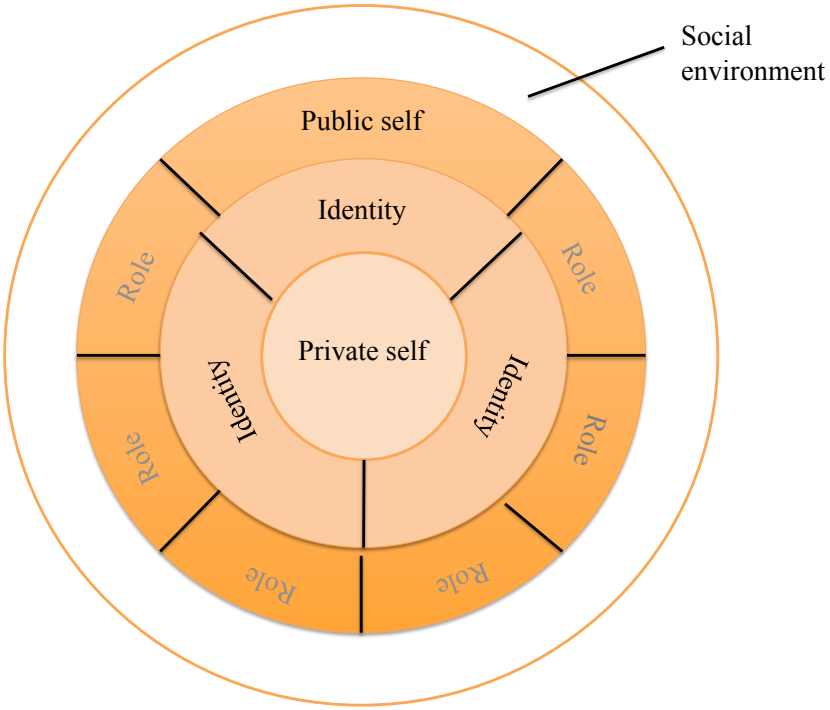

Figure 8. Private self, identities and public self as different layers of the self-concept (adapted from Solomon 2004, 150)

The outer layer, *public self*, is the social dimension that protects the more personal and unconscious core of the self. Public self is constituted from different roles that are in constant interaction with the social environment and are active at a given time, depending on the situation (Solomon 2004, 151). Roles have mostly social functions that facilitate self-expression and communication with others, but through the interaction between roles and the social environment, the individual is also capable of improving the more internal parts of the self. Roles are behaviors expected of someone occupying a certain position in a society. In that sense, roles partition society (Kleine, Kleine & Kernan 1993, 212). Roles are very often supported by consumption activities, and the use of symbolic brands is especially important when a person is playing a new role, for example in a new job, to convince others and him/herself that he/she is performing the role adequately (Solomon et al. 2006, 213). Roles are the most tangible of these three concepts; the term refers to some performances or enactments (Kaiser 1998, 193).

Identities are more stable than the contextual roles, but identities are derived from these roles and formed through social interaction with the surrounding culture (Kaiser 1998, 196). Although there are some culturally agreed factors affecting identities, such as gender, age, sexuality and social position, identities are not ready-made entities that are passed on to individuals by the community or society. Rather, individuals are active and social actors, who continuously construct their identities from different cultural meanings (Hall 1997, 22). Thus, identity is constantly changing and emergent (Gurrieri & Cherrier 2011, 360). This dynamic process is influenced by one's relationships, reference groups and socio-cultural environment, and it is also supported by consumption activities (Hall 1997, 22). The goods an individual perceives to be useful for enacting the associated identity are called *identity-related possessions*. This personal and idiosyncratic set of possessions contrasts with the stereotypical set of things linked to the corresponding role (Kleine et al. 1993, 212).

Inner self is the rather unconscious and stable part of the self, defined as those subjective perceptions a person holds about his or her attributes and qualities (Solomon et al. 2006, 208). The definitions of self-concepts are located along a continuum ranging from the internal psychological view to the external socially situated view, depending on the extent to which internal or external aspects are emphasized (Aledin 2009, 18). The internal view suggests that the inner self forms the basis of our identities and the social roles we hold at any given time (Solomon 2006, 208). However, Kleine et al. (1993, 212) see that external social influences are more important than internal processes in determining who we are. They see that the social roles we ascribe to ourselves are actually the bases of our identities and, collectively, these identities form our inner self. This outside-in way of looking at the process is called the *social identity theory* (Kleine et al. 1993, 212). It is agreed here that relationships with other people and the social environment play a larger part in forming the self, and thus the socio-cultural context is emphasized.

2.3.3.2 Brand meanings as part of the self-concept

The self-concept is developed in a social process where the individual evaluates and compares him/herself to others (Solomon et al. 2006, 209). As a result of this process, individuals develop their actual and ideal senses of selves. The ideal self is our conception of how we would like to perceive ourselves and what we would like to become, while the actual self refers to our more realistic assumptions of the qualities we have or lack (Solomon et al. 2006,

210). Usually there is a discrepancy between the actual and ideal self that individuals try to eliminate by using certain products or brands (Kaiser 1998, 95). Some products and brands are chosen as they are perceived to be consistent with the consumer's actual self, while others are used to help reach the standard set by the ideal self. In a similar way, by avoiding some brands consumers can distance themselves from certain identities with which they do not want to be associated (Solomon 2003, 44). As Berger (2010, 75) states: "We are our brands."

Contemporary scholars have agreed on the influence of the social environment in the creation and development of the self (Aledin 2009, 20). The social environment is filled with cultural meanings that are continuously changing and evolving. Individuals respond to those meanings by the social roles that constitute the outer layer of the self (Solomon et al. 2006, 210). Dynamic identities are affected by the meanings in the socio-cultural environment, but at the same time they filter the meanings that are left out of the self-concept. Thus, brand meanings do not interact directly with the inner self, but through different social roles and identities.

The absorption of meanings from the social environment into the self is not a one-way process; an individual communicate the self to others by choosing certain brands that tell something about the person's actual or ideal selves (Kleine et al. 1993, 213). This reciprocal process explains how the consumption of products and brands contributes to the definition of self. Consumers use brand meanings to construct their self-concepts and identities and to express themselves to others, but also to make judgments about other people. Consumers engage in the production of brand meanings when they make use of, appropriate and give value to the brands in the practices of their everyday life (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 9).

2.4 Synthesis of the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is divided into two parts. The first part elucidates the concept of luxury and further introduces the three dimensions of luxury brands: *functional*, *experiential* and *symbolic*. The second part examines the structure and development of cultural meanings and suggests the interactive transfer of those meanings among three elements: the *culture*, the *brand* and the *individual*. In the synthesis of the theoretical framework, these two parts are combined, and together they form the basis for the empirical research as illustrated in Figure 9.

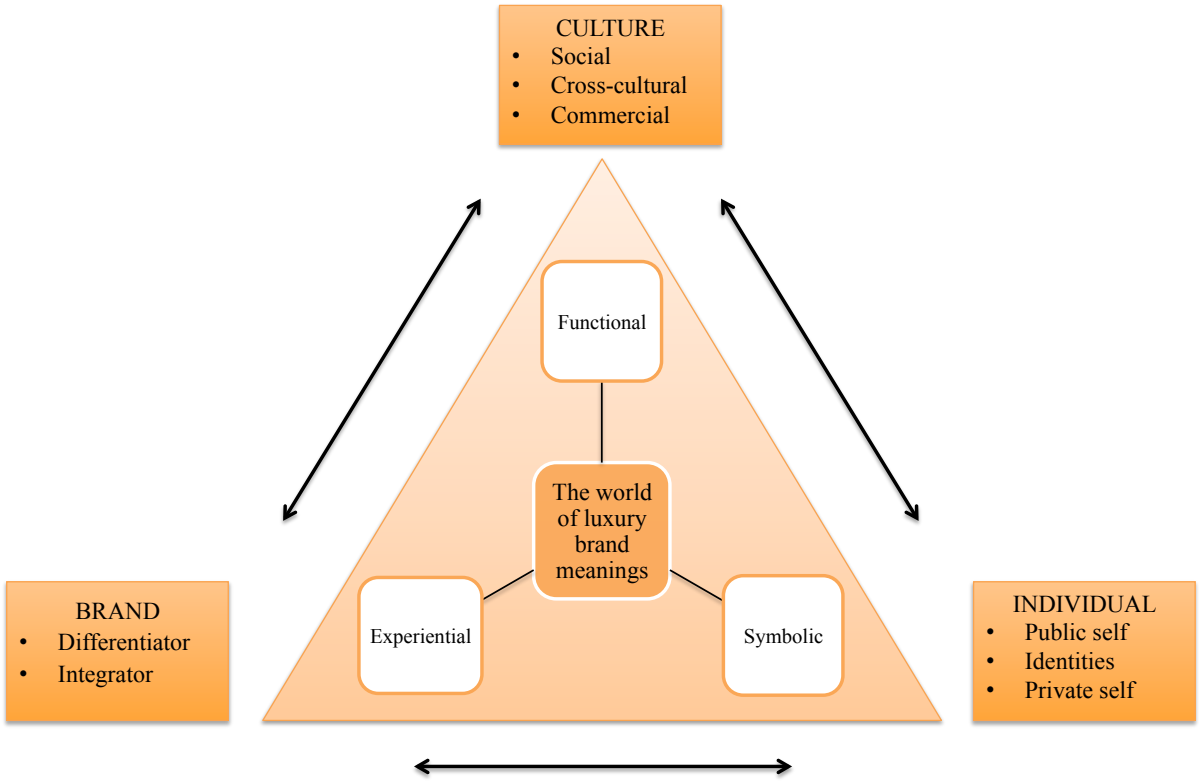

Figure 9. Synthesis of the theoretical framework

The previous literature about luxury brands highlights three important indicators of luxury brand dimensions. First, luxury brands are appreciated for their high quality and functionality, having an association also with the higher price. In the functional dimension, the luxury brand has its material embodiment. Second, the experiential dimension relating luxury to pleasure, emotions and sensory stimulation is very well documented. In the experiential dimension, the luxury brand forms its individual subjective value. Third, luxury brands have a strong symbolic dimension that includes both the self and others. The symbolic dimension is the realm of social collective, which associates the individual with a desired group, role or self-image (Vickers & Renand 2003; Wiedmann et al. 2007; Berthon et al. 2009; Tynan et al. 2010; Shukla & Purani 2011). The three dimensions of luxury brands form the field of meaning, within which consumers can negotiate different meanings for luxury brands.

According to contemporary research, meaning is formed in the interaction between the *object*, the *individual* and his/her surrounding *culture*. Branded goods, such as luxury brands, have a plethora of different meanings depending on the brand, the interpreter and the cultural context

in which the brand is used. To understand the cultural context in depth, culture is examined from three different perspectives that were considered relevant in terms of this study: as *a social construction of shared meanings*, as *a psychological construction of cross-cultural dimensions* and as *an economic construction of commercialized symbols*. Brands are seen to serve two different functions: *differentiation* and *integration* – both important for the meaning production. An individual is considered to form brand meanings based on his/her self-concept that includes the *public self*, various *identities* and the *inner self*. Figure 9 illustrates these determinants that decisively affect the formation of different brand meanings. The two-directional arrows depict the reciprocal movements of the meanings and represent the dynamic process of meaning development (Rajaniemi 1990, 21).

Because meaning is generated through the interaction of the brand, the individual and his/her culture, and because it becomes visible only after the interpretation, it is impossible to obtain a purely objective and exhaustive description of meanings in theory. Therefore, to understand the meanings consumers attach to luxury fashion brands, empirical research is conducted using interpretive methods that allow subjective interpretations of individual consumers and their personal meanings for luxury fashion brands.

3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

3.1 Research philosophy

All research is underpinned by philosophical assumptions (Hunt & Hansen 2010, 111). Ontology, epistemology and methodology are considered key concepts in the philosophy of the social sciences (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 12). Research reflects a particular way of looking at the world (ontological assumption) and possesses a certain orientation that determines eligible ways of establishing valid claims to knowledge (epistemological assumptions), all of which influence the methodology used in consumer research (Hunt & Hansen 2010, 111). For many researchers, epistemological, ontological and methodological premises are related to each other as an interpretive framework, incorporating a certain set of beliefs that guide the implementation of the study. This unified view can also be termed a paradigm – a worldview that defines what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry (Guba & Lincoln 1994, 107). As Gummesson (2005, 316) illustrates in his research edifice, all research starts with the foundation of the researcher's paradigm and pre-understanding, termed the *basement* in his model.

3.1.1 Social constructionist paradigm

It is commonly agreed that the paradigm concept has taken on different meanings over time and remains somewhat vague and unclear (Baker & Saren 2010, 33). According to Kuhn (1962, 10), "paradigms" refers to "accepted examples of actual scientific practice — examples which include law, theory, application and instrumentation together." Arndt (1985, 11) stresses that paradigms are social constructions, because they reflect the values and interests of dominant researchers and their reference groups. For a paradigm, researchers need to share not only theories, but also a basis for theory choice (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 16). Moreover, paradigms deal with the proper domain of a science, guiding the research questions it should ask, the methods it should use to find an answer and the rules to follow in the interpretation of the results (Bagozzi 1976; Carman 1980 in Arndt 1985, 11). These are the main subjective, intersubjective and objective choices that Gummesson (2005, 316) also incorporates in the lowest level of the research edifice, the basement.

Although some researchers label all qualitative research as being interpretive, others prefer to make distinctions among various philosophical paradigms (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 17). Alternative paradigms can be seen as different windows to reality or "different ways of tracking truth" (O'Shaugnessy 2010, 183). Guba and Lincoln (2000, 165) identify five different paradigms in their representation of competing paradigms of inquiry: positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, constructionism and participatory. This division is limited to the social sciences and is open to discussions on definitions, meanings and implications (Aledin 2009, 47).

There are many forms of interpretivism and constructionism, but the dominant form of current interpretive research is *social constructionism* (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 20). The philosophical base of social constructionism is grounded in hermeneutics and phenomenology, both having an influence on the ideas of reality and knowledge as socially constructed, rather than discovered, by human beings (Schwandt 2000, 197). According to Burr (2003, 2), no one feature could be said to define social constructionism, but instead it has its foundation in four key assumptions. First, it takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, contrasting its views about the world, including ourselves, with what is referred to as positivism and empiricism in traditional science. Second, the ways in which we understand the world are historically and culturally relative, depending upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time. Third, knowledge is sustained by social processes and interactions, particularly language. Fourth, knowledge and social action go together – each different construction of the world brings a different kind of action or behavior from human beings.

Social constructionist researchers are likely to contend that the practice of science and theory development can never be objective or dispassionate exercises (Maclaran, Saren, Stern & Tadajewski 2010, 2). Objectivity is regarded as an impossibility, since "each of us ... must encounter the world from some perspective or other ... and the questions we come to ask about that world, and the theories we use, must also of necessity arise from the assumptions that are embedded in our perspective" (Burr 2003, 152). In other words, it is not possible to view the world from no position at all (Närvänen 2013, 72). This means that the researcher is not separate from the world, but an active participant in it, and the very act of observing can affect the outcome of the study. Moreover, a researcher can only view phenomena through her own individual subjective history, life experiences and academic socialization (Maclaran et al.

2010, 2). Therefore, as Burr (2003, 152) suggests, the researcher's task is to acknowledge and work with her own intrinsic involvement in the study and to view the research as a co-production between herself and the people she is examining.

3.1.2 Ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions

Social constructionism denies that knowledge is a direct perception of reality; instead, knowledge is seen as actively and continuously being constructed through experiences and shared meanings between people. Same way, reality is constructed through subjective experiences and perceptions of the individual (Denzin & Lincoln 2003, 305). These constructionist assumptions about reality and knowledge affect the ontological, epistemological and methodological issues of this study, and they are addressed here from the point of view of the chosen paradigm.

Ontology concerns the form and nature of reality (Burr 2003, 92). Ideas about the existence of and relationship between people, society and the world in general are embraced (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 13). The division between objectivism and subjectivism illustrates the different ontological assumptions about these relationships. Objectivism (i.e., in logical empiricism) assumes that the social world has existence independently of people and their actions and activities, while subjectivism assumes that reality is always about individuals' and groups' interpretations (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 14). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994, 110), the constructionist paradigm denies an objective reality and posits that realities should be viewed in the form of multiple intangible mental constructions that are socially and empirically based and local and specific in nature. Since brand meanings are produced in social interaction and are based upon perceptions and experiences that may be different for each person and change over time and context, the reality is understood here as subjective and socially constructed. Thus, two identical realities cannot exist.

Ontological claims in research are closely related to epistemological claims, and they are usually discussed together (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 14). Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and how knowledge can be produced and argued for (Burr 2003, 92). Constructionism assumes that the inquirer and the inquired are interactively linked in the process of investigation and that the findings of an inquiry emerge as the investigation progresses. Thus, constructionism excludes the possibility of objective truth that could be

inferred from replicable findings, as suggested by positivism (Guba & Lincoln 1994, 110). There are two forms of constructionism; *strong constructionism* considers all knowledge claims as relative and thus equally good, while *weak constructionism* accepts that there are specific local, personal and community forms of knowledge (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010, 101). This thesis adopts the form of weak, or moderate, constructionism, which views scientific knowledge as, in part but not entirely, the product of social negotiation (Longino 2002 in Törnroos & Järvensivu 2010, 101). Thus, the risk of ending up in a nihilistic stance is also minimized (Schwandt 2000, 198).

The chosen ontological and epistemological premises guide the choice of methodological alternative (Aledin 2009, 48). Methodologies are concerned with questions such as how we come to know of the world, but they are more practical in nature than epistemologies (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 15). The aim of constructionist inquiry is the understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) hold (Guba & Lincoln 1994, 113). Thus, to reveal and appreciate the meanings interviewees hold for luxury fashion brands, specific methodological choices were made. Silverman (2005, 379) defines methodology as the choices that the researcher makes, including the problems to study, methods of generating the data and forms of analyzing and interpreting the generated data. The methods that were used in this study to understand the research phenomenon better are discussed in the next chapter.

3.2 Research strategy

Research strategies anchor paradigms in specific empirical sites, or in specific methodological practices (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 14). In other words, strategies of inquiry put paradigms of interpretations into action. Research strategy comprises a bundle of skills, assumptions and practices that researchers employ as they move from their paradigm to the empirical world. At the same time, strategy of inquiry connects the researcher to specific methods of collecting and analyzing empirical materials (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 14). In turn, no method is a separate or mechanically added entity in a research project, but it is interwoven into the theoretical underpinnings of methodologies and should be closely related to the research question, data generation and theoretical frame of the project (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 28).

3.2.1 Qualitative methodology

The choice of research method depends upon what we are trying to find out. No method, qualitative or quantitative, is intrinsically better than the other, and the method that will work best for a specific task cannot be determined in advance. This purely pragmatic argument suggests that the nature of the research phenomenon should define the most appropriate method of inquiry (Silverman 2005, 6). Qualitative methodology is primarily directed to understanding the complex and the elusive in a systematic way, rather than to establishing unequivocal causal relationships between single variables (Gummesson 2005, 312). The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured, in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 4). Qualitative research aims at a holistic understanding of the issue studied and is sensitive to the context of the phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5). Qualitative researchers emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality and seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 4).

The research problem in this study, concerning the meanings young female luxury consumers construct for luxury fashion brands, guided the choice of research procedures and techniques. The aim is to forge an in-depth understanding of brand meanings and how they are negotiated in the daily lives of the interviewees. This study is not focusing on the frequency or intensity of the brand meanings, which would require quantitative methods, but on the structures and quality of these meanings and how they are produced and interpreted through the culture. As Alasuutari (2011, 24) notes, qualitative research always deals with culture and seeks to explain meaningful action. In line with Alasuutari (2011, 25), culture is taken seriously and not considered simply as a reflection of the economy. However, when examining consumption phenomena and consumers more specifically, economies and markets play a significant role in the production of cultural meanings. This thesis is conceptually positioned under the cultural approach to marketplace phenomena and consumer behavior, known as Consumer Culture Theory (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 4).

Qualitative research is characterized by data generation, analysis and interpretation taking place simultaneously (Gummesson 2005, 312). In this thesis, data collection is called *data generation*, since Gummesson (2005, 312) notes that data in a social environment does not appear in the form of single objects that could be collected, but is generated by the researcher.

In terms of *analysis*, qualitative research is often divided into inductive and deductive analysis. *Inductive reasoning* draws more general claims from observed cases, and *deductive reasoning* is concerned with hypotheses and theories with which particular phenomena can be explained (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 21). In line with Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 95), this division is inadequate, since pure induction or deduction seldom exists and the division leaves out the third logic of scientific reasoning, abduction. *Abduction* refers to the process of moving from everyday descriptions and meanings, given by people, to categories and concepts that create the basis for an understanding of the phenomenon described (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 23). This thesis adopts the abductive approach, in which the phases of two logics of reasoning, induction and deduction, vary. The processes of data generation and analysis form *the middle floors* of Gummesson's (2005) research edifice.

This type of process of iterative knowledge building is also called a *hermeneutic helix* (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 23). Gummesson (2005, 315) describes this helix as "the expansion of the hermeneutic circle, in which the researcher moves from pre-understanding to higher understanding, and from parts to the whole and to parts again, but now with greater understanding." The theoretical pre-understanding of the subject being studied guided the empirical part and the generation of the data. However, the final theoretical framework was formed only after conducting the empirical study. Doing this was ensured that the theory and empirical part would go solidly hand in hand. This body of knowledge evolved as a hermeneutical spiral between the theoretical knowledge and empirical findings during the simultaneous phases of data generation and analysis. By moving between the subjective level and the more abstract level, the goal of greater understanding of the research phenomenon was achieved. At this point of the research, the highest level of Gummesson's (2005) research edifice, *the penthouse,* was reached.

3.2.2 The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.
(Rene Magritte, surrealist painter)

In the quest to understand consumers more thoroughly and more deeply, it is essential for researchers to acknowledge how people think and then to engage in specific research methods that enable consumers to entirely represent their thinking. Fundamentally, what must be

understood are the "cognitive structures or mental models that underlie consumers' feelings of involvement, perceived personal relevance, and finally, consumer behavior" (Christensen & Olson 2002, 477).

Cognitive structures, or mental models, are considered higher-order representations of consumer perceptions, as they place individual constructs into context and identify the structure (how they are organized in the consumer's mind) and content (the inherent meanings) of these constructs (Sugai 2005, 642). The term *mental model* is preferred here over cognitive structure, because "*cognitive structure* implies that all representations are cognitions (beliefs), but the broader term, mental model, allows other meaning representations to be included, such as attitudes, emotions and feelings, symbols, personal values and representations of sensory experience" (Christensen & Olson 2002, 478). Indeed, consumers' mental models are made up of both cognitive and emotional components.

Two fundamental assumptions about mental models need to be addressed here. First, mental models are made up of images (Zaltman 1997, 427). Although it is widely assumed that people think with their language, thoughts are actually image-based rather than word-based, and language is only a tool that humans use to convey their mental images to others (Christensen & Olson 2002, 481). If thoughts are image-based, then the content of mental models is necessarily images. Second, much of the content of consumers' mental models is unconscious or tacit (Christensen & Olson 2002, 481). Most emotions and cognitive functions, which guide thought and behavior, occur without awareness. Feelings, the conscious experience of emotions, are only a tip of the iceberg (Zaltman 1997, 426). This means that most mental life is unconscious.

Metaphors are a key concept in mental models, since they deal with both aforementioned assumptions (Catchings-Castello 2000, 10). Metaphors both invoke and express nonverbal imagery. Because they can elicit cognitive processes beyond those displayed by literal language, metaphors surface important mental states that cannot be expressed literally. Metaphors are also important in eliciting hidden knowledge; they make unconscious thoughts and experiences more conscious and communicable (Zaltman 1997, 425). Overall, metaphors are central to thought, and they are considered the foundation of our entire conceptual system (Catchings-Castello 2000, 10). According to Zaltman (1997, 425), a metaphor is "a definition of one thing in terms of another." Metaphors are so basic to the representation of thought that

people are often unaware of their use and therefore of their significance in the creation of thoughts (Soyland 1994 in Zaltman 1997, 425).

Thus, there is a clear disjunction between how consumers think and the methods used by consumer researchers to elicit this thinking. Most marketing research tools are verbo-centric, relying on literal language to collect, analyze and report data (Catchings-Castello 2000, 7). However, as was stated above, people are better able to convey their thoughts in nonverbal terms, and therefore research that is strictly based on written or verbal interactions might be missing some critical details (Sugai 2005, 643). Those research techniques are sometimes accused of "depth deficit," since they fail to discover how consumers really think (Mulvey & Kavalam 2010, 373). The deficiencies in current marketing research methods have given rise to the development of new techniques and customer-centric tools (Catchings-Castello 2000, 7). *Projective techniques* enable consumers to express themselves more fully, subtly and fairly, helping researchers to understand how they really think and feel (Mulvey & Kavalam 2010, 373). Moreover, they are sensitive to metaphors and also accommodate nonverbal expressions of perception and experience (Zaltman 1997, 425).

A key objective of this study was to gain access to the meanings consumers attach to luxury fashion brands. The mental models represent the interpreted meanings of a product or a brand which can be accessed through projective techniques and which would otherwise be withheld (Mulvey & Kavalam 2010, 373). While a number of techniques have been employed to surface those meanings, the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (later ZMET) has gained recognition for being the most robust of these tools (Sugai 2005, 642). ZMET was developed by Gerald Zaltman, a professor of business administration at Harvard University, in the early 1990s (Christensen & Olson 2002, 480). ZMET is defined in U.S Patent No. 5,436,830 as "a technique for eliciting interconnected constructs that influence thought and behavior" (Catchings-Castello 2000, 7). In this thesis, ZMET was applied to meet the research objective.

ZMET uses visual and other sensory images to access the metaphors of consumers, and it applies these to understand the structure and content of consumers' mental models (Sugai 2005, 643). It is based on a number of different disciplines, such as neuroscience, neurobiology, psychology, psycholinguistics, art critique, literary criticism, anthropology, sociology and semiotics (Catchings-Castello 2000, 8). ZMET is a hybrid method that uses

modified versions of the Kelly Repertory Grid and laddering techniques (Mulvey & Kavalam 2010, 374). The Kelly Grid technique is a process of identifying how any two of three stimuli are similar, but different from the third stimulus (Catchings-Castello 2000, 9). Laddering is a method of probing during in-depth interviews, producing a hierarchical value map, which might link product attributes and functional benefits to an important personal value (Christensen & Olson 2002, 480). Using the Kelly Grid increases the likelihood of surfacing relevant constructs, while laddering increases the likelihood that associated ideas and relevant connections among constructs are being understood. (Catchings-Castello 2000, 9)

Metaphors, photo analysis and narrating are the key concepts in ZMET (Catchings-Castello 2000, 10). Metaphors serve as the basis for the technique. As was stated above, they actually serve as the basis for our entire conceptual system (Zaltman 1997, 425). Pictures are the tools for the technique, providing a natural and efficient mechanism for customers to communicate. Although photo analysis has been used as a research tool for more than 50 years, it is important to acknowledge here that ZMET allows participants to collect their own pictures, leaving them in charge (Catchings-Castello 2000, 9). Narrating has also been used in many disciplines, since storytelling is the most natural way for human beings to organize information about other people and their actions (Padgett & Allen 1997). Narrating is the first step and provides the framework for the entire ZMET process.

3.2.3 Data generation

Zaltman (1997, 428–432) provides a set of instructions and guidelines for generating, analyzing and interpreting data by using ZMET. Those guidelines were followed rather strictly and considered very helpful, since there was no previous experience using this method or any other projective techniques. The guidelines and different steps of the ZMET process are outlined in the following chapters, while the phases of data generation, analysis and interpretation of this study are introduced. Those three phases are discussed separately, although in reality they were overlapping and occurring in a cyclic, rather than linear, sequence.

When selecting participants for a qualitative study, two qualifications are essential in terms of a specific research problem: the accessibility and the suitability of the participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 51). In a qualitative study, participants can be recruited from the

researcher's own networks or using so-called snowball sampling. Here, data was generated using a *convenience sample* of six respondents in Finland and six respondents in China, 12 respondents altogether (see Table 2). The participants differed in their backgrounds, and their ages ranged between 23 and 35. The prior criterion for choosing the participants was that they were themselves using luxury fashion brands. Finnish respondents were recruited from the friends and acquaintances of the interviewer, in Tampere, Helsinki and Turku; Chinese participants were recruited with the help of Chinese contacts in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

The interviews in China were arranged during a two-week trip to Shanghai and Guangzhou in March 2014, and in Finland during the period from April to June 2014. With two of the Chinese interviewees, an interpreter was used. The interviews took place at the interviewer's home (3), at the interviewee's home, (1) or in coffee shops (8). Their duration ranged between 45 and 120 minutes. The interviews were recorded with iPhone and transcribed on the same day. The interviewees' names were changed to pseudonyms, to ensure their privacy. Letters from A to F were used for Chinese informants and numbers from 1 to 6 for Finnish respondents.

When each of the respondents was contacted for the first time, she was sent a set of instructions by e-mail (Appendix 1). Participants were asked to take photographs or collect images from magazines or the Internet that represented their thoughts and feelings about luxury fashion brands and bring the pictures to the interview. They were given around 10 days to collect these images, since Zaltman (1997, 428) suggests that this time period allows people enough time to find meaningful stimuli. Participant-generated pictures were used, instead of researcher-supplied pictures, since they are richer in meaning and the choice of pictures is guided by the mental models of respondents (Zaltman 1997, 428). Each picture is a metaphor that expresses important meanings about the subject being studied (Christensen & Olson 2002, 483).

However, there were a few difficulties in explaining the instructions to some of the Chinese participants, because they were not familiar with these kinds of projective techniques and their purposes. By using an interpreter to translate the instructions into Chinese for two of the respondents, the difficulties were overcome. The Finnish participants were more confident with the instructions, since they had the possibility to ask further questions in their native

language, as many of the respondents did. Overall, the interviews proceeded well with both the Finnish and the Chinese participants. All the participants were excited about collecting the pictures and were well prepared with the stories behind each picture.

Table 2. Respondents of the study (* means an interpreter was used)

Participant	Age	Residence	Occupation	Recruited from	Location	Duration
A	33	Shanghai	Consultant	Contact	Coffee Shop	62 min
B	32	Shanghai	Communication Manager	Contact	Coffee Shop	45 min
C	26	Shanghai	Consultant	Contact	Coffee Shop	50 min
D	31	Beijing	Sustainability Researcher	Contact	Interviewee's Home	75 min
E	35	Guangzhou	Store Manager	Contact	Coffee Shop	60 min *
F	27	Guangzhou	Channel Manager	Own Network	Coffee Shop	70 min *
1	29	Turku	Education Manager	Own Network	Interviewer's Home	75 min
2	25	Helsinki	Tax Consultant	Own Network	Coffee Shop	90 min
3	23	Tampere	Marketing Assistant	Own Network	Coffee Shop	120 min
4	35	Tampere	Content Producer	Own Network	Interviewer's Home	100 min
5	28	Tampere	University Student	Own Network	Coffee Shop	45 min
6	25	Tampere	Shift Manager	Own Network	Interviewer's Home	60 min

The in-depth interviews followed the steps in the ZMET method as described by Zaltman and Coulter (1995). According to Catchings-Castello (2000, 11), the steps should be customized according to the focus of each research project. Here, eight steps were used, and they were combined with the steps Zaltman has used in his two studies (1994 and 1997). In the first step, *storytelling*, participants described the content of each picture in their own words. Many of them had prepared for this and had a particular story they wanted to tell. In the second step, *missed images*, participants were asked if there were some pictures they wanted to find but they could not. Only one participant reported missed images. Obviously, the magazines and Internet are filled with images expressing the luxurious lifestyle, so it was rather easy for respondents to find expressive images. In the third step, *sorting*, participants sorted their pictures into meaningful sets and removed duplicates, usually coming up with three to four different themes.

In the fourth step, *construct elicitation*, modified versions of the Kelly Repertory Grid and laddering were used to elicit basic constructs and their relationships. The interviewer selected randomly three of the interviewee's pictures, and the interviewee was asked to describe how any two are similar and yet different from the third one in relation to the research topic. This process continued until no new constructs were identified. To clarify the participants' overall impression of the luxury fashion brands, they were asked to select the *most representative picture* (the fifth step) and to describe the *opposite image* (the sixth step) that represented the opposite of luxury fashion brands for them. According to Zaltman and Coulter (1995), to clearly define something, one must know both what it is and what it is not. In the seventh step, *sensory images*, the participants described the taste, touch, smell, sound, color and emotion of luxury fashion brands. In the eighth step, the *mental map*, participants created a summary image that expressed the most important constructs under study.

With 12 respondents in this study, the saturation point was achieved and the targeted completeness of the consensus map was met, since the same constructs were recurring in most of the interviews with the Finnish and, respectively, with the Chinese participants. According to Zaltman (1997, 432), data from four or five participants, at most, is generally required to generate all of the constructs in a consensus map. He argues this by stating that the mind is not the possession of the individual, but it grows from interactions within the socio-cultural world. Christensen and Olson (2002, 484) argue that one-fourth to one-third of all participants is usually enough to produce the meaningful constructs in a consensus map.

Overall, the data generated by using the ZMET method was rich and diverse, and it included meanings expressed both verbally and nonverbally. Given that pictures can express a wide variety of beliefs and emotions and that thoughts are image-based, using pictures as a tool of data generation was well justified in this study.

3.2.4 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data generation, analysis and interpretation often take place simultaneously (Gummesson 2005, 312). Here, the analysis of the generated data started already during fieldwork, and tentative conclusions were drawn from the notes and drawings produced during the interviews. The more formal analysis started right after all data was generated, using the method that Zaltman (1996, 1) calls the semiotic analysis. Semioticians believe that "everything has a hidden meaning," and ZMET attempts to uncover these "hidden meanings" (Catchings-Castello, 2000, 9). A construct itself has little innate meaning, but it acquires meaning through interrelated associations with other constructs (Edelman 1992 in Zaltman 1997, 430). Therefore, the data must be aggregated to reveal the original meanings. This happens in two phases: first the individual mental maps are formed, and then the individual maps are combined as an aggregated consensus map, to represent the collective mental model across consumers (Christensen & Olson 2002, 484).

The data analysis began with the coding of the transcribed interviews. Each transcript was assigned individual color codes, to represent the thoughts and ideas outlined during that interview. Open coding was applied by adhering to the grounded approach by Strauss and Corbin (2008). Transcripts were coded in the same order as the interviews were conducted, and they were coded twice to make sure that the codes created with the later transcripts were applied equally in the earlier transcripts. After similar codes started to emerge, they were grouped into "code families" (Sugai 2005, 646) to represent specific categories of meaning and assigned a descriptive construct name. Throughout the coding process, the *constant comparative method of analysis* (Glaser & Strauss 1967, 101) was applied, to verify that each coding interpretation was well supported by verbatim evidence in the transcripts. According to Christensen and Olson (2002, 484), this rigorous questioning process forces a very close reading of the interview transcripts and leads to well-grounded interpretations.

After no more new constructs emerged, a final list of constructs was developed. Transcripts were read again, and every time respondents mentioned that two ideas were interrelated, linkages between these constructs were coded. For example, an interviewee said "Buying an expensive bag of extremely good quality shows me that I've done some quality work also myself, because I'm able to buy that bag." This was coded as a construct dyad "luxury fashion brands symbolizes *personal achievement"* This way, the construct dyads were identified and the mental models were created.

Next, the individual mental models were combined as an aggregated map that represents a consensus mental model across participants. The aggregated map includes the meanings from both the Finnish and the Chinese participants. According to Christensen and Olson (2002, 484), in order to keep the aggregated model intelligible but still meaningful, the researcher has to find the right cutoff level. It is not possible to include every connection between constructs made by any respondent, but it is not reasonable to eliminate too many dyads either. The researcher has to find a balance between detail and interpretability (Christensen & Olson 2002, 484). In practice, many different versions of the consensus map were created, with different cutoff levels. As a rule of thumb, Zaltman (1997, 430) suggests that a given construct must be cited by half or more of the participants. Here, the final consensus map includes eight central constructs and 36 minor constructs. This is roughly in line with the rule Zaltman (1997, 430) has created that a completed consensus map should include between 25 and 30 constructs and represent 85% of the constructs mentioned by any one participant.

To facilitate the forming and reading of the consensus map, Christensen and Olson (2002, 485–487) have outlined a few general rules that were followed here. First, the analysis began by looking for central, highly connected constructs. These *central constructs* define themes or frames of reference and represent how respondents have self-organized their thoughts and feelings into smaller units of meaning. Essentially, these eight themes identify what luxury fashion brands mean to these respondents. Next, the *overall goal/end state* was identified. The overall goal is the deep meaning, which all the other constructs, to greater or lesser degrees, link to. Finally, the *missing constructs* were traced. These are the constructs or themes that the researcher expected to find but could not. Usually these constructs are part of a wider theme or are implicit throughout the map. However, it is important that the researcher considers the reasons why some self-evident constructs are not present. After all phases were carefully considered, the final consensus map was created.

4 HETEROGENEOUS BRAND MEANINGS FOR LUXURY FASHION BRANDS

4.1 Consensus map of consumers' meanings for luxury fashion brands

In this chapter, the aggregated consensus map for the Finnish and Chinese luxury fashion consumers is introduced. This aggregated map represents the main themes and meanings reflected by the consumers in the ZMET interviews. This chapter provides the analysis of these concepts and linkages between them, and it identifies the different meanings that young female luxury consumers construct for luxury fashion brands in Finland and China. In a cross-cultural context, it is expected that the key constructs and themes may vary across different cultures (Shukla & Purani 2011, 1417). The empirical data, generated from the Finnish and Chinese respondents, is analyzed together under each theme, and the differences are identified and discussed, together with the similarities. The variety of constructs and themes shows the heterogeneous nature of meanings consumers attached to luxury fashion brands. These constructs are specific to the empirical case in this study, but they are analyzed in regard to the existing research on luxury brands. As a final step, the synthesis of the theoretical framework is re-evaluated and complemented with the findings.

The aggregated consensus map reveals eight collective constructs for luxury fashion brands shared among both the Finnish and the Chinese respondents. These themes are (a) *pursuing hedonistic pleasure;* (b) *driving force in life;* (c) *appreciating beauty, art and quality;* (d) *daydreaming and fantasy world;* (e) *connecting and expressing the self;* (f) *seeking connection to others;* (g) *matter of investment;* and (h) *valuing sustainability*. As seen in Figure 10, each of the themes includes several more detailed sub-themes that form the thematic region. Some of the themes, such as *pursuing hedonistic pleasure* and *appreciating beauty, art and quality,* are closely related to each other. The connections among different themes are illustrated with the dotted lines in the map. The overall goal among the thematic orientations, which all the other constructs eventually link to, is *embracing life.* All the consumers, to a greater or lesser degree, reflected that they purchase and use luxury fashion brands because it is enjoyable and they appreciate all the beautiful things in life.

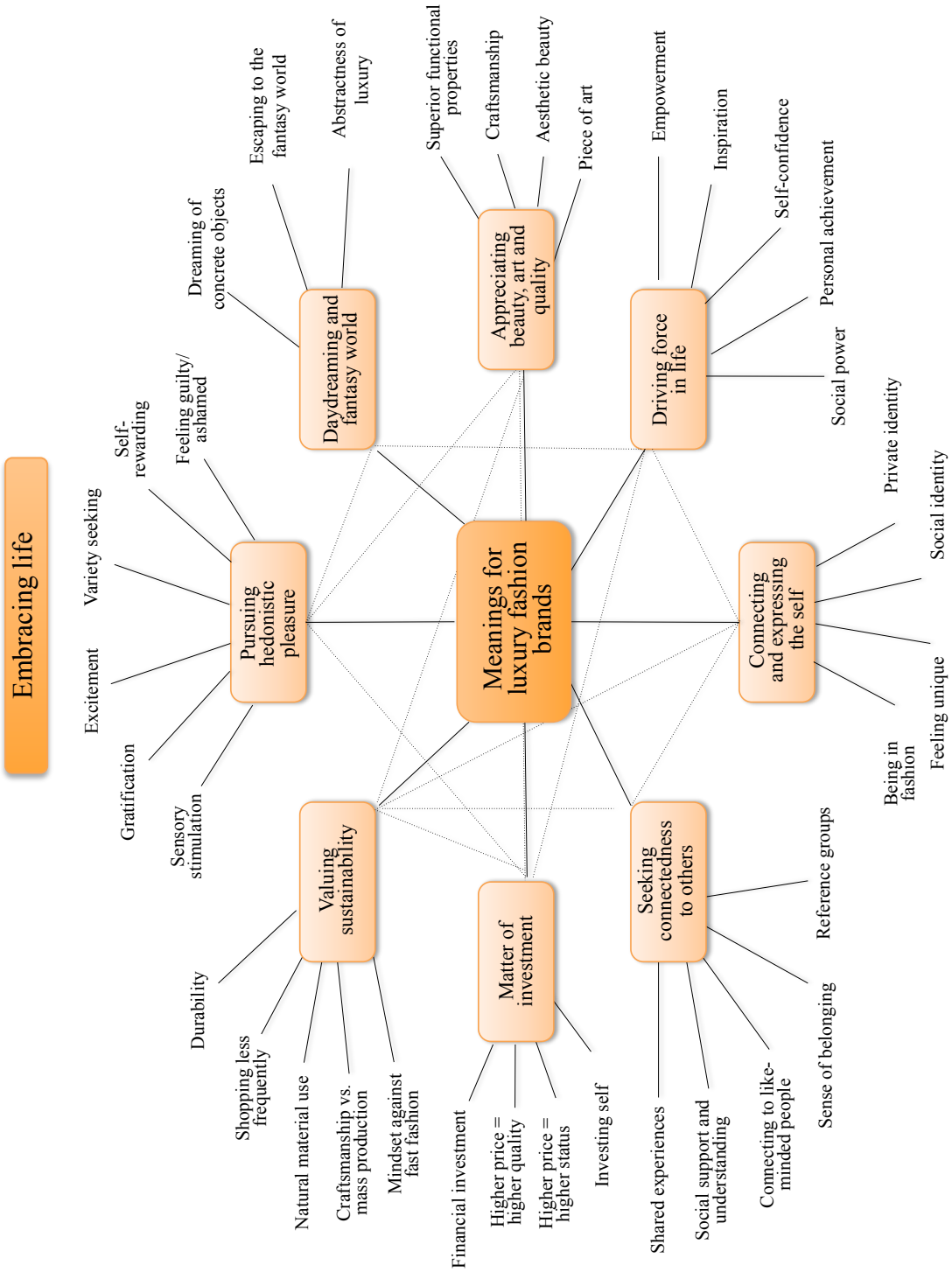

Figure 10. Consensus map of consumers' meanings for luxury fashion brands

4.1.1 Pursuing hedonistic pleasure

Certain products and brands carry an emotional meaning and provide intrinsic enjoyment in addition to their more tangible benefits (Wiedmann et al. 2007, 7). In the literature, these subjective and intangible aspects of consumption are referred to as *hedonistic consumption* (Hirschman & Holbrook 1982, 92). Here, hedonism describes "the perceived subjective utility and intrinsically attractive properties" acquired from the purchase and consumption of luxury fashion brands (Sheth et al. 1991 in Wiedmann et al. 2007, 7). All of the Finnish respondents referred to this kind of hedonistic pleasure when they talked about luxury fashion brands; they brought out concepts such as sensory pleasure, gratification, aesthetics and excitement. For the respondents, luxury fashion brands brought joy to everyday life.

> *Every day my Vuitton bag [pointing to the Louis Vuitton bag on the sofa] makes me so happy. It may sound superficial, but I could have paid even four times more for it and I would still be as happy as I am now. These things you don't think in terms of money. It has brought so much joy and happiness to my daily life and I feel so much happier when I'm using my bag.* (3)

> *Let's face it, luxury products produce sheer pleasure. It's crazy, but still every day, one of my bags, Dolce&Gabbana bag, which I've purchased about 1.5 years ago, makes me happy when I'm using it. I'm like "This is just so beautiful." Although I'm a very down-to-earth person, I still get some kind of hedonistic pleasure from those items. (1)*

> *It's the emotional state. Like a very strong excitement, or thrill. It's like going to the Chanel store for the very first time, you know, your stomach is tingling and you are almost in shock, because you see the things around you that you have been only dreaming of. Very strong feeling of excitement, like tasting something you haven't ever tasted before. (2)*

These responses are in line with the previous studies in the field, which have shown that luxury brands with a strong experiential dimension aim to satisfy intrinsic needs with regard to sensory stimulation, hedonistic pleasure and variety seeking (Dubois et al. 2005; Vickers & Renand 2003; Vigneron & Johnson 2004; Wiedmann 2007). Finnish respondents had collected pictures representing the entertaining and emotional sides of consumption and explained the feelings and affective states they received from using these brands. They also described luxury fashion brands by generating internal imagery containing the smell of leather, feel of fur, taste of champagne and sounds from classical music to silence. According

to Hirschman and Holbrook (1982, 92), multisensory factors, such as sounds, scents, flavors, tactile impressions and visual images, are an important part of the hedonistic experience.

Chinese respondents talked less about their emotional desire and sensory gratification towards luxury fashion brands. They did not talk about emotions, such as happiness, joy or excitement, nor did they use any other sensory expressions than visual images, unlike their Finnish counterparts. These notions are similar to those of Oswald (2012, 193–202), who studied luxury consumers in Shanghai and noticed that many respondents purchased luxury fashion items, such as watches and bags, without engaging with the emotional attributes and while showing indifference for the brands in the emotional level. However, respondents here raised the topic of variety seeking and self-rewarding, which can be considered part of hedonistic consumption habits (Sheth et al. 1991 in Wiedmann et al. 2007, 7). Self-rewarding was also recognized by the Finnish respondents.

> *That picture shows why a lot of people want to collect a lot of pieces of the same brand, because they want to reward themselves. (E)*
>
> *It's a way to reward ourselves for the hard work! We have a right to enjoy it. (F)*
>
> *Well, Chinese people are really changeable, they want to be updated with their clothes and such. Fashion brands satisfy their need for change and variety. (B)*

Although Finnish respondents associated luxury fashion brands with the beautiful and pleasant things in life, they showed signs of feeling guilty in their quest for hedonistic pleasure. Examining guilt or shame in the context of consumption is a novel approach, since current consumer theory still assumes that consumption contributes only to positive experiences and feelings of pleasure (Talvio 2011, 11). However, recognizing the feelings of guilt or shame associated with luxury consumption is important, since indulgence in hedonic desires is one of the greatest antecedents of explaining consumer guilt (Dedeoglu & Savasci 2010, 9). Talvio (2011, 13) defines consumer guilt as "a feeling, which results from one's recognition of having violated personal or social moral standards in the context of consumption." The respondents were feeling guilty or ashamed of buying or using luxury fashion brands, had a bad conscience due to the amount of money they spent, and were afraid of being judged as shallow. Although signs were minor, they need to be identified, since they reflect the socio-cultural attitude towards luxury that still has some negative connotations.

I don't know what's wrong with me, but I feel so much happier when I'm using my bag. (3)

I have to admit that I get a pleasure from these products, even though it sounds terribly superficial. (1)

I really get a bad conscience about the amount of money I've spent on something that is only satisfying my hedonistic needs. I start to think about how many poor children I would have been able to feed and clothe with that money. (5)

The negative meanings of guilt and shame in buying or using luxury fashion brands did not emerge with the Chinese respondents. This might result from the fact that the respondents did not show the quest for hedonistic pleasure or gratification either. In addition, a focus on one's public image, seeking prestige by acquiring higher-priced products, is acceptable in many collectivist cultures, like in China (Wong & Ahuvia 1998; Shukla 2010; Shukla & Purani 2011). Thus, there are no reasons stemming from the socio-cultural environment to feel guilty about spending money on one's self, which is earned by hard work – highly appreciated in China. The meanings Finnish and Chinese participants associated with the theme *pursuing hedonistic pleasure* are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Meanings attached to "Pursuing hedonistic pleasure" theme

Pursuing hedonistic pleasure		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Sensory stimulation	**x**	
Gratification	**x**	
Excitement	**x**	
Variety seeking		**x**
Self-rewarding	**x**	**x**
Feeling guilty or ashamed	**x**	

4.1.2 Daydreaming and fantasy world

According to Astous and Deschenes (2005, 2), consumers often realize part of the consumption in their minds; they imagine, dream or fantasize that they possess some desired

object, or that they live certain experiences. The authors use the term *consumption dream* to refer to the mental representations of consumption objects that consumers desire and want to realize. Here, luxury fashion brands were strongly linked to consumption dreams. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, 96) suggest that consumers may indulge in such mental activities simply because it gives them pleasure. For example, Finnish respondents were not dreaming about certain products, but the dreaming itself was seen as important, and they referred to constructs such as "escaping to the fantasy world." Because luxury fashion was seen as far from reality, it offered a perfect destination for dreaming. Hansen and Wänke (2011, 790) suggest that the association between luxury and abstractness is based on the psychological distance of luxury. Psychological distance manifests itself in many ways; luxury is exclusive and socially distant, and purchases are seldom and often only hypothetical (Hansen & Wänke 2011, 790).

> *This surpasses reality, it is like a fantasy world [pointing to one of the pictures]. You could never walk here to have your morning coffee dressed like that. But that makes it luxury; it is out of this world. For me, luxury is strongly linked to dreams, but it doesn't mean I'm only dreaming about the material goods, but the close connection with some kind of fantasy world. (2)*

> *This is like the life that I want [pointing to one of the pictures]. I have a certain image in my head about the moments I would like to have in my life, it's like my "dream life," and luxury fashion brands just belong there. They somehow bring my dreams closer to me. (3)*

For Chinese respondents, dreaming and fantasizing had a different meaning in the consumption context. Their dreams were more concrete and linked to certain products or brands. Chinese respondents were more often dreaming about their future purchases and comparing likely alternatives. Their dreams were mostly product-related, and they were able to refer to the physical composition of the product they were dreaming of. Those elements, such as design features or product performance, constituted more concrete and pragmatic meanings than the non-product-related fantasies of the Finnish respondents.

> *This is something I would really like to have next [pointing to a Mulberry bag]. I often read fashion magazines and dream about things I would like to have in the future. (A)*

> *Next I would like to buy a black leather bag. I'm dreaming of Chanel 2.55, but at the moment it's out of my reach, financially. I'm looking for some alternative, black color, elegant style, timeless design. It's nice to dream about what to buy next. (C)*

It is recognized that a continuum between the realistic and the fantastical exists, so two basic forms of fantasy behavior can be discussed (Fournier & Guiry 1993, 352). There are signs of both behaviors among respondents; Chinese referred to *viable dreams* that included the anticipation of probable future actions, while Finnish referred to *pure fantasizing*, in which the realization of those dreams was not in the center, but the dreaming activity itself was. In both behaviors, the gratification and simulation can be so positive that the dreaming itself serves as a positive surrogate experience (Fournier & Guiry 1993, 352). Since the dreaming activities were entertaining and inspirational for both respondents, the act of dreaming is considered very important here, since it prolongs the gratification of consumers. These meanings attached to *daydreaming and fantasy world* emerged as new in the field, since contemporary research has mainly focused on the concrete consumption and neglected the consumption that happens in the minds of consumers (Astous & Deschenes 2005, 1). They are represented in Table 4.

Table 4. Meanings attached to "Daydreaming and fantasy world" theme

Daydreaming and fantasy world		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Dreaming of concrete objects		**x**
Escaping to the fantasy world	**x**	
Abstractness of luxury	**x**	

4.1.3 Appreciating beauty, art and quality

Various studies in the field show that superior quality is one of the most mentioned attributes when talking about luxury brands (Gentry et al 2001; O'Cass & Frost 2002, Vigneron & Johnson 2004, Dubois et al. 2005; Wiedmann et al. 2007). The literature on luxury consumption often underlines this importance of quality to ensure the perception of luxury (Wiedmann et al. 2007, 6). However, differences in how consumers perceive quality in

different cultures emerged. For Finnish respondents, high functional quality was considered important, but at the same time it was viewed as self-evident and inherent in luxury products. More strongly, the aesthetic beauty, the reflection of art and the fact that the products were handmade by talented craftsmen in the workshops created the quality image.

> *This is taken from the ad of the Paulig [Finnish coffee brand] where they have these highly talented artisans. I chose this picture because it embraces the craftsmanship and the special skills to create something with your hands. I appreciate the fact that many luxury products are still made by artisans. (1)*

> *At its best, a luxury fashion item can be considered like a great piece of art. The designers are like real artists, creating something totally unique. (5)*

> *For a long time, the fashion world has been very superficial, but recently it has joined the world of art, and artists like to provoke and do things differently. When these artists combine with the luxury fashion brands, amazing things happen. And that is the image of superior quality for me. (4)*

> *Many of the luxury fashion products are just incredibly beautiful, causing you the feeling like "That is just so beautiful that I have to have it" instead of just buying it because it is on sale. Luxury products are just so breathtakingly beautiful. And usually I get these kinds of experiences elsewhere, like from nature. (1)*

For Chinese respondents, then, the utilitarian, more concrete considerations, such as materials, fitting, details, finishing, durability and resistance, contributed to the image of excellent product quality. Thus, Chinese were more focused on functional, product-related quality, while Finnish were more interested about the aesthetics and the image of the craftsmanship. Although Chinese conceived product quality in practical physical terms and sought functional benefits, there was underlying, more profound significance composed of deeper meanings about feeling oneself worthy of good quality.

> *In luxury fashion, the quality is the most important thing, you don't spend money to get a thing that is not durable, that's the basic need. But also the design and the materials are very important. Like leather, or cashmere, materials must be natural. (B)*

> *Quality is really important, I would choose the highest quality in the same level brands that I can afford. I would choose the best quality product. I focus on the details and elegant finishing of the product. I also want the product to last longer. (E)*

> *For me the quality means comfortable to use. I think the fabric must be comfortable and it must have some detail to light up the whole design, no specific fabric, just the feeling of wearing it is comfortable, convenient and easy. (F)*

For Finnish respondents, the craftsmanship, the aesthetic beauty and the appreciation of artistic nature of the brands was highly linked to the quality image, while Chinese emphasized the product's functional attributes and usability. They expected the product to look good, fit well, last long and perform as expected. These results are somewhat inconsistent with the study by Shukla and Purani (2011), who found that individualistic consumers demanded higher levels of functionality and utility from the product purchase than collectivists. These inconsistencies might result from the evident emphasis on aesthetics, design and art when talking about luxury fashion brands instead of talking about luxury brands in general as in the previous studies. Both respondent groups conceived the excellent quality in terms of functional meanings, but underlying this there was a more profound significance composed of experiential meanings, especially for Finnish participants. These meanings are represented in Table 5.

Table 5. Meanings attached to "Appreciating beauty, art and quality" theme

Appreciating beauty, art and quality		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Superior functional properties	**x**	**x**
Craftsmanship	**x**	
Aesthetic beauty	**x**	**x**
Piece of art	**x**	

4.1.4 Driving force in life

Among the many tasks brands can perform, they can help consumers to achieve goals that are motivated by the self. Brands may act as symbols of personal accomplishment, provide self-esteem and help people through life transitions (Escalas & Bettman (2005, 379). Many of the Finnish respondents viewed luxury fashion brands as being a driver of moving forward, creating an urge to push themselves further in life and providing a sense of empowerment.

Many of them also considered luxury fashion brands a source of inspiration, self-confidence and attitude. These attributes were attached to inner motives and personal achievement. Successful consumption activities can increase one's confidence and ability to the point where success in other areas of life is more achievable (Christensen & Olson 2002, 488). The use of brands that embody perfectionism and refinement gave these kinds of feelings to the users of these brands.

> *They [luxury brands] can be so powerful and strong, giving you the same kind of feeling when using them. It's like inspiration for yourself, striving for perfection in whatever you're doing. (2)*

> *I've noticed that after my job has changed radically, I've started to be more interested about what I'm wearing. I wouldn't say it's a matter of social status or anything, it's more like an indicator for myself that I'm competent to work in my position. (1)*

> *Personally, for me, these things just symbolize success. When you wear these things [pointing to a picture] and you go to your office, you can walk straight into the corner room with the landscape and say "I take this one". Dressed like that, you feel so much better about yourself and your performance at work. In a demanding job, it gives you mental power. (2)*

> *Luxury fashion can give you self-confidence. You know, when you wear ripped jeans and white tank top and then you add a branded bag to your outfit, you feel like "I rock!" If I wouldn't wear the bag, I wouldn't get the feeling. It's weird, but it brings some kind of boost to your presence, you get a good feeling about yourself. You feel like, "Hey, I'm a classy lady." And even if other people don't even notice that, you put yourself on some kind of pedestal in your own head. (4)*

Very close to and almost compatible with the meaning of achievement is the meaning of power. Both meanings are related to self-enhancement, but achievement is associated with personal success, while power is related to social success and dominance over people (Batey 2008, 19). Most of the Chinese respondents did not refer to personal goals or transformation but raised the topic of social status and prestige and talked about achieving a certain kind of level in a society by using luxury fashion brands. Thus, luxury fashion brands were acting as motivational drivers also for the Chinese, but the origin for motivation came from social, rather than personal, goals.

> *For many young people, luxury goods can be a driving force to make more work and make more money [laughing]. I think it has a positive influence on us. I've heard a lot*

about luxury goods, so I want to push myself further, to earn more money, so I can enjoy them also. (E)

I think luxury goods give you a higher social standing among other people. This picture shows this. People want to be beautiful; they want to be a star. Everyone wants to be a star! (F)

Both of these meanings are closely related to the concepts of self-esteem and self-enhancement. People are likely to feel better about themselves if they value and appreciate themselves and their belongings (Aledin 2009, 28). However, the meanings attached to the theme *driving force in life* can be divided into two sub-dimensions: self-directed and other-directed (Tynan 2010, 1159). Here, Finnish respondents were more concerned about self-directed symbolism, such as ambition, empowerment and personal success. For the Chinese, other-directed symbolism was more relevant, since luxury brands were seen to be important to individuals in search of social status and ranking among their peers.

Much of the existing research has emphasized interpersonal aspects like prestige, conspicuousness and seeking status in the context of luxury fashion brands (Wiedmann et al. 2007, 3). However, new meanings reflecting more personal aspects, such as perfectionist motives and striving for mastery, were recognized, and it is suggested that such inner drivers should be also included in the symbolic dimension of luxury brand meanings. These meanings are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Meanings attached to "Driving force in life" theme

Driving force in life		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Empowerment	**x**	
Inspiration	**x**	
Boosting self-confidence	**x**	**x**
Personal achievement	**x**	
Social power		**x**

4.1.5 Connecting and expressing the self

Brands can be used to satisfy psychological needs, such as reinforcing and expressing the self (Belk 1988; Kleine et al. 1993; Escalas & Bettmann 2005). The most important function in moderating the relationship between one's self-image and one's image of the brand is *self-congruity* (Mick 1986; Belk 1988; Wiedmann et al. 2007). Respondents confirmed the significant impact of self-congruity on their luxury brand purchase and use. However, there were differences between Finnish and Chinese respondents in what was considered as self in the context of self-congruity. For Finnish respondents, luxury fashion brands were a source of personal attributes and traits which they could easily relate to, and the use of these brands provided a way of feeling connected to the self and their own set of values. Thus, they let brands resonate and communicate the private, inner part of the self.

> *I have my own style and my own comfort zone. I want to be on the cutting edge and be stylish, but I never want to feel insecure in my outfit. It can be bold, but it has to be sexy. The way I dress always reflects my personality. My outfit has to look like me. Dressing is one tool for self-expression, it tells who you are and reveals your mood at the given moment. (4).*

> *It's like feeling connected to myself and my own values. Living the life that looks like me is luxury to me. That's why the brands I use have to be matching with my lifestyle, my values, and my own personal me. That way I can also tell other people what kind of things I value and who I am. (3)*

> *For me, luxury brands that I use have to be very low-key and subdued, because that's who I am. I'm not a big fan of "in your face" brands or style. I'm a calm person and I appreciate harmony and tranquility in everything, also in the way I dress and the brands I use. (1)*

The self-congruity was important also for the Chinese respondents, but they focused mainly on the outer part of the self. They talked less about the personal, inner connections between the luxury brands and their identity, but emphasized the congruency between the brands and their own style. Focusing on their style, Chinese respondents were overall more concerned about trends and assigned a higher priority to fashion in their brand choices. In their study of consumers' use of fashion discourse, Thompson and Haytko (1997) conceived the conventional ways of talking about fashion as a system of cultural meanings. Their respondents employed different cultural discourses about fashion (e.g., traditional, natural, modern, hippie) to create social categories as a basis for their own social identity. For the

Chinese, it was easier to perceive the relationship between fashion and their own style than between brands and their identity or inner part of the self.

> *In this society we have a lot of ways to communicate with each other and I think that luxury goods are actually one way to convey your personal style to others. (F)*

> *I want to stay with the fashion. I want to follow the trends and change my style little by little and refresh it. I used to like Dolce&Gabbana, but their cutting and fitting has changed a bit, so now I don't find it that suitable for my own style anymore. Now my style is more like Marc Jacobs style, free style, casual. (E)*

> *So I like simple things, you know in China they have lots of bling things, it's the traditional Chinese style. I can't accept it [laugh]. I like simple things, not so much decoration. I'm pretty confident with my style, most of my clothes are black, and you know, black can make you have class and make you look comfortable and confident. (D)*

Regardless of referring to personal or social identity, it was important for both respondents to feel themselves unique. In contemporary consumer cultures, consumers usually acquire and display material possessions, such as brands, for the purpose of feeling differentiated from others (Chan et al. 2012, 562). Finnish respondents preferred one brand to another according to their own personalities and readily identified the symbolic distinctions among different luxury fashion brands. Through the use of different brands, they were able to differentiate within an in-group, based on their personalities, taste, traits and values. Thus, they mostly engaged in horizontal differentiation (Tafarodi et al. 2004, 790). When Finnish respondents compared themselves to others, these "others" were other luxury consumers as well (in-group), not, for example, fast fashion users (out-group). This in-group setting is revealed in the comments, such as *"They know, who know"* and *"Gucci knows another Gucci."*

> *For me, when I'm buying for example a luxury bag, the brand means a lot. There are differences between the brands, like I've always loved Gucci and Chloe, but then, Versace or Givenchy has never been my cup of tea. (4)*

> *I love Gucci and Dolce&Gabbana. There is something that really speaks to me in those brands. They are both Italian brands. Maybe that is one explanation. Or they are more subdued than some other brands. (1)*

Chinese respondents, in turn, did not draw clear qualitative distinctions between luxury fashion brands. As was shown under the thematic orientation of *pursuing hedonistic pleasure*, Chinese did not relate to brands on emotional nor personal levels, and therefore they failed to

make symbolic distinctions among the brands, based on the brand culture, personality and values. Most of them preferred the very well-known luxury brands, also recognized by out-group members, such as Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Hermes. This is in line with Oswald (2012, 195), who noticed that the responses of Chinese consumers to different European luxury brands focused on the most general meanings of luxury, such as price and exclusivity, instead of conjuring up any emotions, experiences, fantasies or deeper meanings. Thus, most of the Chinese respondents engaged in vertical differentiation, i.e., differentiating between groups, by selecting brands that are visible, confer status and are highly desirable also for the out-groups (Dommer et al. 2013, 659).

> *As for me, I just can't tell so many differences between the brands. Chinese consumers just see the price, maybe the logo also, but the price is the most important. Higher price means higher social status. (F)*

> *The most important reason for Chinese to buy luxury is that they try to find their own identity in this society and I can say that 90% of the people, who buy Hermes or buy LV bags, they do not know from which countries these brands come, they know nothing about them, they just know this is expensive and if I buy it, my friends and other people see that when I carry this one, they will see me as a different person and this is kind of identity of self. (A)*

> *Chinese people get more and more money and they know more about luxury brands so there are more people who want to raise their social level among their peers by buying luxury brands and they can choose the one that contributes to their social identity. (A)*

As can be seen from Figure 10, the thematic orientation of *connecting and expressing the self* is linked to most of the constructs in the consensus map. It was clearly seen from the interviews that respondents integrated symbolic meanings, such as perfectionism or sustainability, into their own identities or lifestyles. However, the difference was that Finnish respondents let the brand meanings resonate with their inner, more private self, while Chinese recognized the connection with their style and social identity, but did not find luxury brands to express their personal values or lifestyles. For the Chinese, luxury fashion brands were seen to be more important in searching for social status and representation; for Finnish respondents, they were more important in searching for harmony with their own values and lifestyle. The meanings attached to *connecting and expressing the self* are widely recognized also in previous literature (Belk 1988; Thompson & Haytko 1997; Tian et al. 2001; Berthon 2010; Tynan et al. 2010; Shukla & Purani 2011). These meanings are represented in Table 7.

Table 7. Meanings attached to "Connecting and expressing the self" theme

Connecting and expressing the self		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Self-congruity with personal identity	**x**	
Self-congruity with social identity	**x**	**x**
Feeling unique	**x**	**x**
Being in fashion		**x**

4.1.6 Seeking connectedness to others

In addition to being used to assert one's individuality (personal or social) and allowing one to differentiate him/herself from other people (vertically or horizontally), luxury fashion brands can also serve a social purpose by reflecting social ties and reinforcing the feeling of belonging (Escalas & Bettman 2003, 340). Seeking connectedness refers to "individuals' attempts to create and maintain feelings of mutual support, liking and acceptance from people or groups they value and care about" (Smith & Mackie 2007, 17). Based on the interviews, it was clearly seen that through the use of luxury fashion brands, both groups of respondents felt that they were connected to other like-minded people, with whom they shared similar tastes and lifestyles. For Finnish respondents, it was also important that they got to share the experiences with someone and get social support for their opinions and actions.

> *This means [pointing to a picture] about sharing the luxury experience with someone near to you. Like that you can share the moment and joy with someone. It's so much fun to celebrate with someone who shares the same passion as you do and understands you. (3)*

> *For me, luxury is all about sharing the experiences with my friends. I get double happiness if I can celebrate the moments with someone who understands. It's important to have people around you who support you and share the same kind of lifestyle. (6)*

> *This was a very special moment for me [pointing to a picture], when I was having a midnight coffee in Gucci store with my sister. I wouldn't have done that kind of thing*

> *alone I guess, it's a thing where you can share the moments, and sometimes the shoes you buy, with someone. Mostly I do it with my sister. It's like our common thing. (1)*

In the thematic orientation of *seeking connectedness to others*, Chinese respondents emphasized the strong sense of belonging and community. By using certain luxury fashion brands, respondents felt they were belonging to the supposed groups using those brands. However, there was no evidence in the respondents' stories of the existence of any specific brand community, formed around one brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), but there were references to overall sense of belonging and connectedness to others. This connection through the use of luxury fashion brands encouraged the development of new relationships and maintained old ones. The greater emphasis on social orientation, shown by the Chinese respondents, is in line with Hofstede's (1991) definition of collectivist culture, where relationships with other people play a key role.

> *I think that luxury goods are actually one way to convey your personal style to others and help you to get closer with the same kind of persons, with whom you can have endless topics to talk about, maybe you feel united. You get closer easier. (F)*

> *The best thing is that I have a couple of real friends who have the same value for life as me, and we cherish each other. I can meet them frequently and we can talk to each other about common topics. We love luxury fashion and it is like our mutual hobby. (A)*

> *The community is one of the most important things for Chinese consumers, it's one of the key needs, and I think this includes a lot, for example those brands can group people in different ways. (B)*

Chinese respondents showed also greater importance of reference groups than their Finnish counterparts. Escalas and Bettman (2005, 379) suggest that consumers are likely to accept meanings from brands consistent with an in-group and reject meanings associated with an out-group. The Chinese referred to make brand choices that are inspired by positive reference groups, while most of the Finnish respondents did not talk about the influence of reference groups at all. Chinese respondents also recognized the undesirable out-groups and brand meanings attached to them and were differentiating themselves from the members of those groups. Reference group usage of a brand provides user image associations and psychological benefit associations for brands (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

So many Chinese people say "Oh, who is saying it's good? If others say it's good, I will follow that." (F)

It's the reference, well, if my friend has an LV, I choose the brand because my friend has one and she says it is good, or some press say it's popular in China. The reference group is very important for people in China. (E)

Luxury brands should keep in mind that consumers in this country are not yet so mature to have an independent insight, where you can make the choice based on the brand story, instead, we need to have a king or queen, that just controls the feeling of other consumers, like "I'm the best, just follow me." (B)

I have some girlfriends and they think Louis Vuitton is vulgar, because Louis Vuitton is always bought by that kind of stupid rich people and it looks so countryside, so they think "I don't buy Louis Vuitton, I know the real luxury brands." (C)

It can be seen that luxury fashion brands fulfilled important social needs for the respondents. For Finnish respondents, shared experiences with other like-minded people were considered most important, but the feeling of belonging and social support was also valued. For them, the lack of original communal values in today's society might cause the need to feel connected and to share consumption practices and objects with others (Närvänen 2013, 21). However, they did not emphasize the communal values as much as the Chinese respondents, for whom the feeling of being connected to others and of belonging emerged as a crucial factor. Consistent with this feeling of community, Chinese respondents stressed the role of reference groups and the influence of both the positive in-group and the negative out-group. These results are in line with Shukla and Purani (2011), who recognized that the collective mindset of Asian consumers reinforced their need to feel united. These meanings are illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8. Meanings attached to "Seeking connectedness to others" theme

Seeking connectedness to others		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Shared experiences	**x**	
Social support and understanding	**x**	**x**
Connecting to other like-minded people	**x**	**x**
Sense of belonging	**x**	**x**
Reference groups		**x**

4.1.7 Matter of investment

One of the most common meanings attached to luxury fashion brands is the expensive price and consumers' willingness to pay a premium (Miller & Mills 2012, 1473). Referring to luxury brands, researchers have demonstrated that the higher price of the product may work as a positive indicator of the higher quality of that product (Erickson & Johansson 1995 in Wiedmann et al. 2007, 6). Also, the higher price may represent higher status for prestige-seeking consumers (Shukla & Purani 2011, 1420). Taking into account the importance of price in the luxury sector, it was rather surprising that the question of price did not emerge with any of the Finnish respondents. The absence of this topic suggests that Finns do not consider luxury fashion brands so much as financial investments, but more as investments for their selves, which they do not consider in financial terms, but in their emotional value.

> *This represents the ultimate pampering of myself. In a certain way, I pamper myself when I invest money in something that brings me pleasure. But I do it rarely, and when I do, I have certainly thought it through carefully. (1).*

On the contrary, price was one of the most common topics with the Chinese respondents. Price played a positive role in determining respondents' perceptions about quality, but higher price was also considered to signal wealth, status and prestige. Thus, higher price suggesting higher quality or higher status may make some products or brands even more desirable and consumers more willing to pay the premium (Wiedmann et al. 2007, 6). According to various studies, seeking prestige by acquiring higher-priced products is acceptable in many

collectivist cultures, like in China (Wong & Ahuvia 1998; Shukla 2010; Shukla & Purani 2011). Still, Chinese respondents considered luxury fashion brands expensive and acknowledged the financial costs of these products. Often, they based their purchases on the monetary level they could afford, de-emphasizing elements other than financial costs in the equation of the value of the product or brand.

> *If I have 10 000 RMB I would rather use this 10 000 RMB to buy a one bag rather than 10 bags, so I would prefer to use something for many years, something which is really good quality. (A)*

> *You can see so many Shanghai girls, they maybe only have a salary of 3,000 or 4,000 RMB each year, but maybe they will put all their money to buy this kind of things. In my company there is so many of this kind of girls, but actually you know, I don't buy so much of expensive things, only the things I can afford. (D)*

> *Chinese consumers just see the price, maybe the logo also, but the price is the most important. Higher price means higher social status. (F)*

> *I also buy Agnes and maybe Michael Kors, but my thinking is that I can afford it, it's not a very expensive thing for me to afford, Agnes in Shanghai is only a couple of thousand and the quality is still very good, you can use that for a couple of years, so I would not buy a Louis Vuitton bag, a very expensive one, because if I buy that kind of thing, I think I still can afford it, but it would cost me too much, the percentage of my income is too high. I only buy the things I can afford. (C)*

Chinese respondents considered their luxury purchases as financial investments, since they spent money on something in the hope of future benefits. Future benefits were assumed to be good quality, which makes the product last longer, and the potential of rising in society or among peers. The investment metaphor was also recognized from the responses of Finnish participants, since they were planning their purchases carefully, preferring timeless designs and hoping to benefit from the purchase in a hedonistic way. However, they did not mention the price or talk about the financial sacrifices. Luxury fashion purchases for Finnish respondents were seen as investments for their selves, rather than financial investments. This is in line with Shukla and Purani (2011, 1420), who suggest that the role of price is much more significant for collectivist, compared to individualistic, consumers. These meanings are represented in .

Table 9. Meanings attached to "Matter of investment" theme

Matter of investment		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Financial investment		**x**
Higher price=higher quality		**x**
Higher price=higher status		**x**
Investing in self	**x**	

4.1.8 Valuing sustainability

While luxury goods have traditionally been associated with a lifestyle of materialism, hedonism, conspicuousness and extravagant consumption – quite the opposite of the concept of sustainability – a paradigm shift is currently taking place in the field of luxury consumption (Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann & Behrens, 2013, 25). Consumers are increasingly concerned about ecological and ethical issues, and they prefer products that reflect their own values. In the literature, these consumers are called "green consumers," and they are willing to use more time and money to make their consumption choices more sustainable (Black & Cherrier 2010, 439). Although the phenomenon of "green consumption" is emerging in all social classes, high-income female consumers are especially adopting green values and engaging in sustainable consumption. They are also the ones leading the way for a new, ecological luxury (Autio 2004, 394; Nyrhinen & Wilska 2012, 23).

As Hennigs et al. (2013, 25) suggest, ecological and sustainable values are not necessarily antithetical to luxury. The essence of luxury fashion brands is based on high quality, natural materials, craftsmanship, superior durability and timelessness. Furthermore, their ability to communicate deeper values is a perfect basis for products and brands that preserve ethical and environmental values. Finnish respondents, in particular, recognized these meanings. Sustainability meanings were reflected in the adoption of green values, such as durability, shopping less frequently and natural material use.

> *I have this picture about pristine nature, because I thought that although buying and using luxury brands is a way of consumption, it is more sustainable, both the production and consumption, compared to disposable consumption, where you use the product, made in Vietnam, once or twice and throw it away. I've noticed that since I*

> *bought my first luxury bag, my consumption habits have changed dramatically. Before when I was traveling I bought all kinds of stuff, because it was cheap, now I'm weighing my every purchase more carefully. Do I need it, do I want it. And if I buy a bag, I assume it's going to last, if not the entire life, at least for decades. I don't have to buy a new one all the time. (1)*

> *I really value luxury fashion brands, because they are made so durable and long-lasting that they can actually move from one generation to another. I appreciate the practicality that they really last so well while you are still using them almost every day. I'm thinking green – things that last are much more valuable for me than things that do not. (3)*

Ethical meanings, such as craftsmanship versus mass-production, and the mindset against fast fashion, were also surfaced. To illustrate the concept of fast fashion, Spanish retailer Zara receives new deliveries to its stores twice per week, while H&M and Forever 21 both get daily shipments of new styles and Topshop introduces over 400 styles a week on its website (*Huffington Post* 2014). With new trends coming out every week, the goal of fast fashion is to get consumers to feel they are out of fashion. This is contrary to the essential element of luxury fashion; products are designed to be timeless – they are always in fashion. In addition, the mass-production of fast fashion usually means delocalizing operations to low-cost countries, while most of the luxury brands still perpetuate the tradition of skillful craftsmen making unique products by hand (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau 2014, 5). Thus, the meaning of "timeless" is considered as an ethical, as well as an ecological, value.

> *For me, the ethical point is important here. Fast fashion is trying to get our minds working like we need something new every month, or every week, actually we should buy something new every day to feel ourselves somehow fashionable or stylish. For me, buying or using luxury fashion represents the other extreme. My mom has her Mulberry bags still in use, which she has bought in the '80s. That is maybe the reason why I like Mulberry so much also myself. I've seen that the products last, in use, but also stay in fashion. (5)*

The meanings attached to sustainability were far less referenced by Chinese respondents, and few of them recognized the ecological aspects, such as the use of natural materials and superior durability of the products. It is suggested that responsible consumerism is more ideological (than for example economical consumerism), and that it requires consciousness of environmental problems and social injustice (Autio 2004, 395). It might be that Chinese consumers, who have only recently entered the field of luxury fashion, are not yet engaged with these issues. Another explanation might be that Chinese people are not comfortable

openly discussing social injustice (e.g., child labor) and did not, therefore, outline these topics in the interviews. However, ecological and environmental issues are now causing a lot of debate in China, which might be the reason why the respondents more easily referred to them, rather than ethical issues.

> *With this picture I mean to have some items which I can use for many years. This is actually what I mean when I'm talking about luxury fashion. I do not buy a lot of luxury brands, but I will sometimes buy one bag or one pair of shoes, which will cost that much, but which are really good quality and long-lasting. (A)*

> *The timing for luxury brands is really good now in China. We have just suffered from the haze for the past couple of months and everyone is talking about the change of environment. I think every family in Shanghai is concerned about this. Sustainability and responsibility are becoming more important for Chinese consumers. (B)*

> *I appreciate the natural materials. I like to wear cashmere or silk or cotton. I do not like to wear some synthetic materials that are not natural. Being natural and also thinking about the environment is important for me. (A)*

Academics and practitioners have recognized the meanings of sustainability and responsibility for luxury consumers only recently, and few luxury companies are communicating their sustainability activities to the public (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau 2014, 3). However, according to the responses of the participants in this study, soft values, such as the meanings of ecology and ethics, are increasingly important for consumers, and they are seeking ways to express these values in their lifestyles and consumption choices. Moreover, respondents here did not state any inconsistencies between the sustainability and luxury. The thematic orientation of sustainability is one of the new themes that emerged from the data, and it is linked to many other constructs in the consensus map. The meanings attached to the sustainability theme are represented in Table 10.

Table 10. Meanings attached to "Valuing sustainability" theme

Valuing sustainability		
Meaning	**Finnish**	**Chinese**
Durability	**x**	**x**
Shopping less frequently	**x**	
Natural material use	**x**	**x**
Craftsmanship vs. mass-production	**x**	
Mindset against fast fashion	**x**	

4.2 Conclusions and re-evaluation of the theoretical framework

Based on the various and heterogeneous brand meanings that respondents associated with luxury fashion brands, eight thematic orientations were formed. These highly interconnected themes mark different meaning orientations towards the luxury fashion brands and act as frames of reference that organize consumers' beliefs, emotions and behaviors (Christensen & Olson 2002, 497). The central thematic orientations were similar between the Finnish and Chinese respondents, but the more detailed sub-meanings differed, to a greater or lesser degree, between those created by the Finnish and, respectively, by the Chinese. These collective themes and different sub-meanings are outlined in Figure 11. Images representing each theme are taken from the pictures that participants had collected for the interviews. In this chapter, conclusions are made about the meanings attached to luxury fashion brands and the differences and similarities between the Finnish and Chinese respondents are analyzed. Further, the role of socio-cultural factors in constructing the meanings is discussed. Finally, based on the findings, the theoretical framework is re-evaluated.

4.2.1 The differences and similarities between the meanings for luxury fashion brands among Finnish and Chinese consumers

When comparing the deeper values of the brand meanings between the respondents, several notions can be mentioned. First of all, Chinese participants gave meanings to luxury fashion

brands based on the more general and functional brand benefits they share, such as high price, high perception of functional quality, and higher social status. In the interviews, Chinese respondents did not report engaging with the emotional attributes and fantasies, unlike their Finnish counterparts. Finnish participants, in turn, gave more nuanced and emotional brand meanings, such as source of inspiration, feelings of happiness and joy, sense of empowerment and ultimate form of art and beauty. Relative to Chinese respondents, Finnish respondents placed greater importance on hedonic experience. This is similar to the findings of Wong and Ahuvia (1998, 4), who suggest that hedonistic value gratifies the internal, private self, which is the dominant part of the self-concept in Western countries.

Figure 11. Collective themes and different sub-meanings between Finnish and Chinese respondents

Second, and strongly relating to the previous notion, Chinese respondents found it difficult to make qualitative distinctions between different luxury fashion brands. For them, Louis Vuitton meant “expensive,” “high quality,” and “well known,” but so did Gucci, Chanel and Hermes. Thus, Chinese respondents referred to the luxury category rather than any given brand. This is an important notion for European luxury fashion brands, for which the value is created in the historical brand culture, unique brand personalities and sophisticated set of values (Oswald 2012, 195). Finnish respondents recognized these kinds of meanings more easily and were therefore able to draw symbolic distinctions among the different luxury fashion brands. While describing the intangible and latent brand meanings, they showed strong preferences for one brand to another, while the Chinese preferred the luxury category

to other fashion categories in the market. This was also recognized by Oswald (2012, 195), who compared Chinese and French luxury consumers in her ethnographic study.

Third, Finnish participants based their brand preferences on the consistency between the brand and their own personality, values and lifestyle. Thus, they demanded a strong self-congruency with the brand, on the level of their inner, more private self. They felt that they were able to connect and express their own personal identities and deeply felt values by using specific brands that fit into their self-concept. For Chinese respondents, the self-congruency was also important, but they allowed the brands to resonate only with the outer part of their self, expressing their style, roles and social identity. Thus, it is proposed that both of the respondents were using these brands as the extended self (Belk 1988), but the symbolic meanings for luxury fashion brands were more self-directed and personal among Finnish participants than the other-directed, social meanings of the Chinese. This is again in line with Wong and Ahuvia (1998, 7), who suggest that perhaps the greatest difference between Asian and Western luxury consumption is the extent to which the purchase of status symbols reflects inner, personal preferences or legitimate social roles.

However, this does not mean that Chinese consumers were lacking interest in luxury fashion brands. What they really emphasized in the interviews was the ability of luxury fashion brands to reflect the social ties, such as community, and reinforce the feeling of belonging. By using luxury fashion brands, they felt that they were belonging to the supposed groups using those brands. These groups were often considered superior to other groups, reflecting the symbolic function of luxury fashion brands to mark social status or prestige. For Finnish respondents, the social purpose of using these brands was also served, and, in addition to the sense of belonging, they emphasized the importance of sharing experiences and receiving social support for their opinions and actions. Thus, a fourth notion is proposed: that the social use of luxury fashion brands plays an important role in the development of new forms of community and belonging for both respondent groups.

Finally, the fifth conclusion concerns the signs of the “new luxury” (Nyrhinen & Wilska 2012, 20) that emerged especially among the Finnish respondents. For them, the ecological, ethical and experiential factors were considered highly important, and they associated these meanings, such as durability and ethical production, with the purchase and use of luxury fashion brands. Nyrhinen and Wilska (2012, 20) also found in their study that Finnish

consumers were willing to pay the premium for the products that they felt were representing a more ecological and sustainable way of life. However, the meanings associated with sustainability were far less referenced by the Chinese respondents. They raised the meanings of natural material use and superior durability of the products, but did not refer to wider ecological or ethical concerns or lifestyles. Overall, compared to the Chinese, the Finnish respondents associated softer and more subjective and experiential meanings with luxury fashion brands, representing the postmaterialist values in their consumption (Inglehart 1990, 68).

4.2.2 The role of socio-cultural factors in the construction of meanings for luxury fashion brands

As was stated in the beginning of this study, cultural factors lead consumers to read the world of brands in one way or another (Oswald 2012, 196). It is obvious that all three elements – the culture, the brand and the individual – have an influence on the brand meanings that consumers negotiate, but instead of focusing on the psychological antecedents behind individuals' motivations or studying the different brand images, this study focused on socio-cultural factors in the meaning production. The role of socio-cultural factors is attempted to be clarified by elucidating the differences that might derive from the different socio-cultural environments of the respondents.

Altogether, there were eight themes in the consensus map and 36 sub-meanings within the thematic orientations. Those sub-meanings that were common for both respondent groups mostly concerned the luxury category, such as high quality, exclusivity and aesthetic beauty of the products. The differences, then, arose from the more nuanced and symbolic brand meanings. This can be seen from the number of meanings; Finnish respondents gave 27 different meanings for luxury fashion brands, while Chinese respondents came up with 19 meanings. The fact that Finnish respondents attached considerably more meanings to luxury fashion brands, compared to their Chinese counterparts, is in line with the findings of Shukla and Purani (2011, 1422), who suggest that consumers in developing markets use simpler selection criteria for measuring the value of luxury brands than consumers in developed individualistic markets. There are several factors explaining the differences in the ways respondents negotiated meanings for these brands; they stem from the histories and worldviews of these specific cultures.

The relatively short history of consumerism in China might explain the different values behind the meanings the Chinese respondents gave to luxury fashion brands, compared to the Finnish respondents. These differences in the values reflect the prevalence of materialist/postmaterialist priorities among the respondents (Inglehart 1990, 68). According to Inglehart, an individual places the greatest subjective value on those things that are in relatively short supply and that are affected by the conditions that prevailed during one's pre-adult years. Finnish respondents have been living in an advanced, wealthy, industrial society since their infancy, so they have already gone through the value shift from the materialist needs to the needs for belonging, self-esteem and intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction. Chinese respondents, in turn, showed clear signs of materialist values. However, it is assumed that the fast rise of prosperity in the country will encourage the spread of postmaterialist values, especially among the younger generation.

In addition to the different maturity of the consumer cultures in these countries, the evolutionary stage of the luxury market is also different (Okonkwo 2007, 3). The Finnish luxury scene is already in its mature stage, when consumers approach luxury as a concept that can be adapted to their lifestyles. In Finland, consumers are more familiar with the brands and the overall conventions structuring symbolic consumption in consumer culture, compared to China, where the luxury industry is still in its introductory phase (Okonkwo 2007, 4). Consumers in China may belong to the first or second generation of their families to purchase brands rather than buying commodities with trade vouchers, as was common during the Cultural Revolution (Oswald 2012, 194). The recent history of wars, colonization and communism has disrupted the Chinese history of luxury, which might explain why Chinese respondents found it difficult to relate themselves personally with luxury brands.

Besides the recent entry to the consumer cultures and more specifically to the luxury market, the differences between the meanings given by the Finnish and Chinese respondents might derive from the confrontation of individualistic versus collectivist cultures. Markus and Kitayama (1991) and Escalas and Bettman (2005) suggest that Westerners tend to focus more on the personal, private self and de-emphasize the collective self, while Easterners are characterized by the focus on the social, public self and social recognition. This might explain why Chinese respondents sought status and showed sensitivity to prestige and social recognition, while Finnish respondents focused more on the personal achievement and harmony between the brands and their lifestyle. It has been claimed that the different

conceptions of the self, and of the relationship between the self and others, are the most significant sources of differences among cultures (Solomon et al. 2006, 447).

By reading and comparing the transcripts and the respondents' images, the distinctiveness of the self-concepts was further revealed. When talking about luxury fashion brands, Finnish respondents were using the personal pronouns "I" and "me," conveying the subjective nature of their consumption, while for Chinese consumers, the subject was often "we," "them," "other" or "everyone," and they were often comparing themselves to other "Chinese consumers." The placement of personal and impersonal pronouns structures the discourse around two categories, creating a dualism between self/other, I/them, individual/group and singular/multiple (Roper et al. 2011, 385). For Finnish participants, the brand meanings were overall more subjective, while for the Chinese, the meanings were more social and objective in their nature.

4.2.3 Re-evaluation of the theoretical framework

In the synthesis of the theoretical framework (Figure 9), the meanings of luxury brands were divided into three different dimensions, based on the findings of the previous studies: *functional*, *experiential* and *symbolic*. All of the dimensions were identified here. By analyzing the data, generated by the Finnish and Chinese consumers, it was further revealed how these dimensions occur in practice. All of the themes that emerged from the data were highly connected to each other. Although they could be roughly placed under each dimension, it would not reveal the deeper meanings of these collective orientations, and therefore it is not considered appropriate according to the purposes of this study.

When talking about the overall meanings of luxury fashion brands, all of the dimensions need to be stated together, instead of referring to different dimensions of functional, experiential or symbolic meanings. When describing the meanings Finnish respondents attached to luxury fashion brands, it is fair to talk about subjective, emotional meanings that stem from the artistic and sustainable nature of the products and arouse feelings of uniqueness, but also reinforce the sense of belonging by reflecting the personal values and lifestyles that respondents want to express and share with like-minded people. In a similar vein, the meanings of Chinese respondents can be described as functional, product-related meanings, which signal high quality and high status in the form of high price and allow respondents to

feel differentiated from the others by expressing their social identities and to feel united with desired, like-minded groups.

In the real world, it seems that the meanings of luxury fashion brands do not occur without one another. For example, the meaning of high price arises from the association with the meanings of superior quality or higher social standing. Or the meaning of durability reflects the meaning of high functional quality, but also the meanings of sustainability and lifestyle. This is explained by the fact that the construct by itself possesses little innate meaning; it acquires meaning primarily through associations with other constructs (Zaltman 1997, 430). Therefore, the meanings must be aggregated, as is done in the consensus map, and they must be understood as an integrated and interactive whole, which influences consumers' perception, understanding and behavior.

When the thematic orientations were examined in more detail, it was recognized that five of the themes were similar to the findings of previous studies. The themes of *pursuing hedonistic pleasure; appreciating beauty, art and quality; connecting and expressing the self; seeking connectedness to others;* and *matter of investment* are widely identified in the contemporary literature (Vickers & Renand 2003; Vigneron & Johnson 2004; Wiedmann et al. 2007; Berthon et al. 2009; Christodoulides et al. 2009; Tynan et al. 2010; Shukla & Purani 2011). However, three of the collective orientations that emerged from the data were new in the field.

The meanings of *daydreaming and fantasy world* and *driving force in life* have not been recognized in previous literature. The reason these meanings have not been identified before might be connected to the methods being used. Projective methods are able to reveal vivid and detailed meanings, some of which are deep and perhaps unconscious (Christensen & Olson 2002, 497). Most of the meanings attached to the themes of *daydreaming and fantasy world* and *driving force in life* were metaphorical and abstract in their nature.

The meanings attached to the theme of *valuing sustainability* also emerged as new in the field. Traditional luxury literature has not included sustainability issues in the dimensions of luxury brands; however, newer studies (e.g., Nyrhinen & Wilska 2012; Hennigs et al. 2013; Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau 2014) have recognized that ecological and sustainable values are not necessarily antithetical to luxury, but form an important field of meaning to certain

luxury consumers. The theme of *valuing sustainability* is linked to many other meanings, such as high quality, durability and craftsmanship, expressing personal values and lifestyle and embracing community. The overall goal, or end state, *embracing life*, further reinforces the idea of heterogeneous, multifaceted, postmaterialist values and the notion of the postmodern consumer, for whom the act of consumption and brands are integral parts of life.

Besides the dimensions of the luxury brand meanings, the theoretical framework included the reciprocal interaction among the three different elements that decisively affect the outcome of the brand meanings: the *culture*, the *brand* and the *individual*. It is suggested that each factor is essential for the creation of meanings, so the meanings cannot arise in the absence of any constituent. These three elements were also recognized here, each contributing to the creation of the brand meanings that respondents brought out in the interviews.

Culture included the social construction of shared meanings (e.g., attitudes towards luxury), a psychological construction of cross-cultural dimensions (e.g., collectivist/individualistic framework) and the stage of consumer cultures (e.g., materialist/postmaterialist values). *Brands* were recognized as the tangible embodiments of the meanings, which affected the meaning creation in the form of differentiation or integration. For both respondents, brands were considered as the extended self, though they extended different parts of the self-concepts. *Individuals* co-created and interpreted the cultural brand meanings based on two different construals of the self: independent (Finnish) or interdependent (Chinese). For the Finnish respondents, the inner self (preferences, tastes, abilities, personal values) was more important in the meaning making, while for Chinese, the basis for the meanings lay in one's familial, cultural, professional and social relationships.

Figure 12 illustrates the re-evaluation of the synthesis of the theoretical framework, where the brand meanings associated with luxury fashion brands are represented in the form of the consensus map rather than divided into the different dimensions of functionality, experientialism and symbolism. The meanings in the consensus map are influenced by the interaction among the culture, the brand and the individual. These concepts are complemented in the figure with the findings of this study.

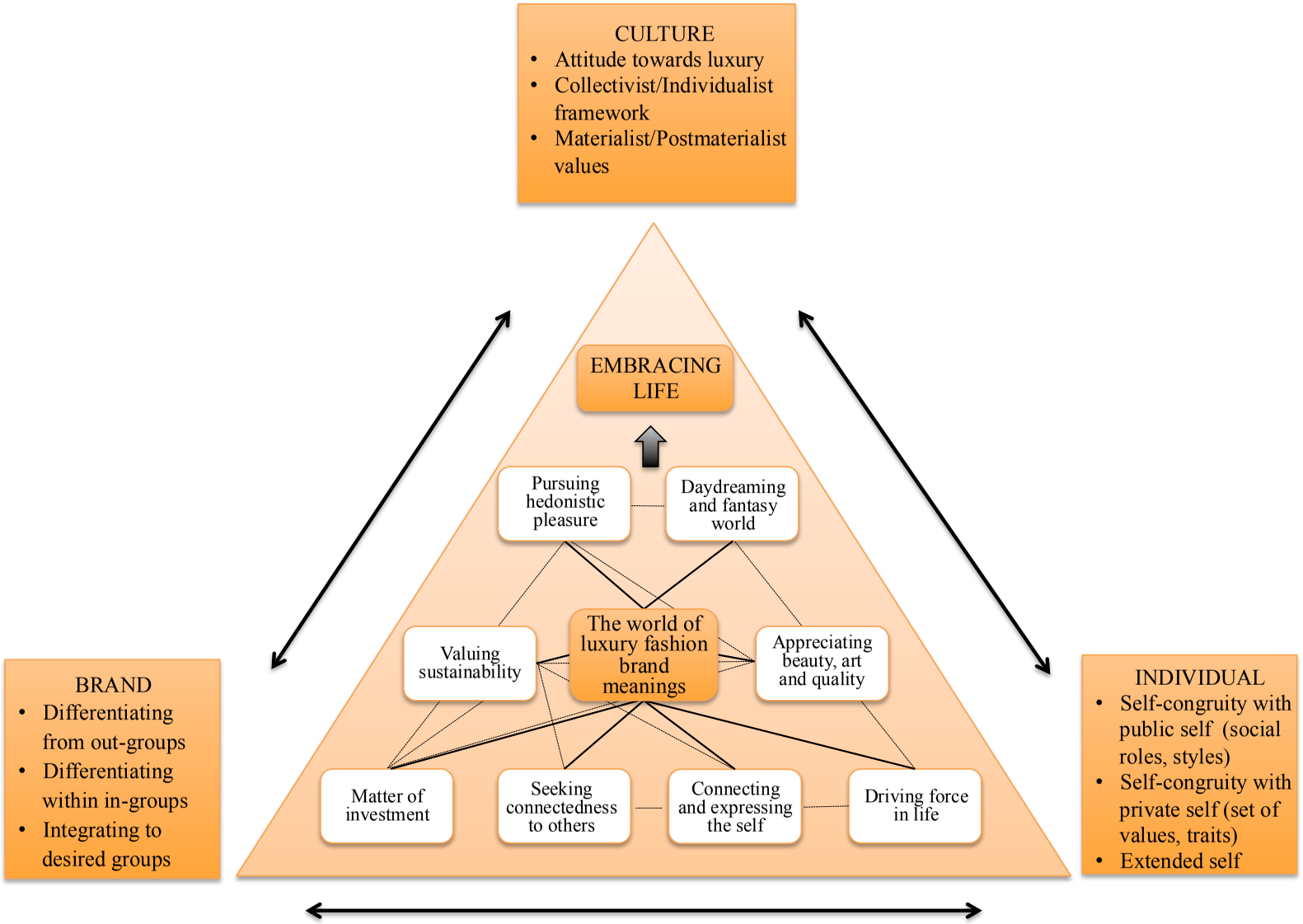

Figure 12. Re-evaluation of the synthesis of the theoretical framework

5 SUMMARY

5.1 Summary of the research

The purpose of this research was to describe and analyze how young female luxury consumers construct meanings for luxury fashion brands in Finland and in China. To achieve this purpose, the research had two research questions:

1. What kind of brand meanings do young female luxury consumers attach to luxury fashion brands in Finland and in China?
2. How do the cultural and social factors contribute to the construction of these meanings in these two countries?

To extend the understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the brand meanings and to provide interpretations of how the cultural and social factors construct these meanings, the theoretical framework of the research was built from two streams of literature. The first part elucidated the concept of luxury and further introduced the three dimensions of luxury brands: *functional*, *experiential* and *symbolic*. It was suggested that these dimensions should be handled together, rather than separately, and they were gathered into one single framework. Still, to understand these three dimensions of luxury brands more deeply, they were combined with the "Three Worlds Model" of Popper (1975). This model was adopted in the study to highlight the relationships among the product, the user and the context.

The second part examined the structure and development of cultural meanings. Semiotics was applied to elucidate the structure of brand meanings. The concept of a signifier/signified relationship suggested that meanings have two components: a material signifier and an abstract signified. In turn, in the triadic model, meanings were seen to consist of three parts: the sign, the object and the interpretant. Both approaches highlighted the role of social and cultural environments, through which meanings are shaped and perceived. Next, three different theoretical models of meaning development were analyzed, and it was suggested that meanings are produced in the interactive transfers among three elements: the *culture*, the *brand* and the *individual*. These constructs were analyzed in detail in relation to the objectives of this study. In the synthesis of the theoretical framework, these two parts of different

theoretical streams were combined, and together they formed the basis for the empirical research.

Philosophically, this thesis was based on the social constructionist paradigm. Since brand meanings are subjective, context-related and formed through social interaction, constructionism served as an appropriate philosophical basis for this study. According to the ontological assumption, reality was understood as subjective and socially constructed. Subjectivism assumes that reality is always about individuals' and groups' interpretations, suggesting that perceptions, such as brand meanings, might be different for each person and change over time and context. Epistemologically, this thesis adopted the form of moderate constructionism, assuming scientific knowledge to be, in part but not entirely, the product of social negotiation, while excluding the possibility of objective truth. In line with the social constructionist paradigm, the inquirer and the inquired were interactively linked in the research process.

Together with the research objectives, these assumptions about reality and knowledge affected the methodological issues of this study. This research was qualitative in nature and adopted a novel projective technique, the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. It was shown that there is a clear disjunction between how consumers think and the methods used by consumer researchers to elicit this thinking. Two fundamental assumptions were addressed: thoughts are image-based and mostly unconscious or tacit. The so-called "depth deficit" typical for contemporary consumer studies was overcome with the use of the ZMET method.

Data was generated using a convenience sample of six respondents in Finland and six respondents in China, 12 respondents altogether. The participants differed in their backgrounds, and their ages ranged between 23 and 35. Respondents were asked to take photographs or collect images from magazines or the Internet that represented their thoughts and feelings about luxury fashion brands and to bring the pictures to the interviews. The in-depth interviews followed the eight steps in the ZMET method: storytelling, missed images, sorting, construct elicitation, the most representative image, opposite image, sensory images and the mental map. The data generated by using the ZMET method was rich and diverse, and it allowed meanings to be expressed both verbally and nonverbally. The constant comparative method of analysis was applied, leading to well-grounded and credible interpretations.

To address the first research objective, the aggregated consensus map was created. This aggregated map represented the main themes, sub-meanings and linkages among them created by the Finnish and Chinese respondents in the ZMET interviews. All the three dimensions of luxury brands suggested by the previous literature were identified, but it was further revealed how these dimensions occur in practice. All of the themes that emerged from the data were highly connected to each other. Although they could have been roughly placed under each dimension, that would not have revealed the deeper meanings of these collective orientations, and therefore it was not considered appropriate according to the purposes of this study. Moreover, three new thematic orientations were identified: *daydreaming and fantasy world*, *driving force in life* and *valuing sustainability*. These new themes represent highly personal, experiential and emotional meanings, suggesting that consumers attach more emotions and feelings, symbols, values and sensory experiences to luxury fashion brands than had been previously thought.

The eight thematic orientations were similar between the groups of participants, but there were differences between the more detailed sub-meanings imposed by the Finnish and by the Chinese. Based on these differences, five conclusions were drawn. First of all, Chinese participants gave meanings to luxury fashion brands based on the more general and functional brand benefits they share, while Finnish engaged with the more nuanced and emotional brand meanings. Second, Chinese respondents found it difficult to make qualitative distinctions between different luxury fashion brands, and they referred to the luxury category rather than to any given brand, while Finnish respondents were able to draw symbolic distinctions among the different luxury fashion brands and showed strong preferences for one brand over another.

Third, Finnish participants based their brand preferences on the fit between the brand and their own personality, values and lifestyle. Thus, they demanded a strong self-congruency with the brand, on the level of their inner, more private self, while Chinese allowed the brands to resonate only with the outer part of their self, expressing their style, roles and social identity. Fourth, the social use of luxury fashion brands played an important role in the development of new forms of community and belonging for both cultural groups. Finally, the fifth conclusion concerned the emergence of the new luxury. Finnish respondents in particular considered ecological and ethical factors highly important and associated these meanings with the purchase and use of luxury fashion brands. Overall, for Finnish respondents, the brand

meanings were more subjective, softer and more experiential, while for Chinese respondents, the meanings were more social, objective and utilitarian in their nature.

The second research objective was fulfilled by analyzing how the cultural and social factors influenced the construction of brand meanings. First of all, the relatively short history of consumerism in China might explain the different values behind the meanings Chinese respondents gave to luxury fashion brands, compared to Finnish respondents. The differences in the values reflected the prevalence of materialist/postmaterialist priorities. Second, the evolutionary stage of the luxury market in these countries is different. The Finnish luxury scene is already in its mature stage, while in China, the luxury industry is still in its introductory phase. This might explain why Chinese respondents found it difficult to relate themselves personally with luxury brands. Third, the confrontation of individualistic versus collectivist cultures might explain why Chinese respondents sought status and showed sensitivity to prestige and social recognition, while Finnish respondents focused more on personal achievement and harmony between the brands and their lifestyle.

What was fascinating for the researcher was to find that all the collective themes in the consensus map represent the seven different *deep metaphors* that form our basic views of the world. Zaltman and Zaltman (2008, 33) describe these deep metaphors, which structure what we think, hear, say and do, as the basic categories of patterned thinking and decision-making. Deep metaphors start developing at birth and are shaped by our social environment. They capture the *human universals*, which means the traits and behaviors found in nearly all societies. The fact that people from very different backgrounds use the same relatively few deep metaphors explains why the eight collective themes in the consensus map were similar between Finnish and Chinese respondents and the differences started to appear only in the surface sub-meanings. Thus, consumers in different parts of the world can experience the same deep metaphors differently (Zaltman & Zaltman 2008, 45). The collective themes found in the study are represented in Figure 13, together with the corresponding deep metaphor.

As a final conclusion, it is suggested that the heterogeneous nature of brand meanings highlights the role of consumers in shaping the luxury brand meanings together with their socio-cultural environment. The interpretive repertoire of Finnish and Chinese respondents extends the meanings far beyond the ones that brands have possibly created by themselves and far above those that have been recognized by prior research, showing considerable

sophistication and dedication from the consumers in the appropriation, interpretation and co-creation of the luxury fashion brands.

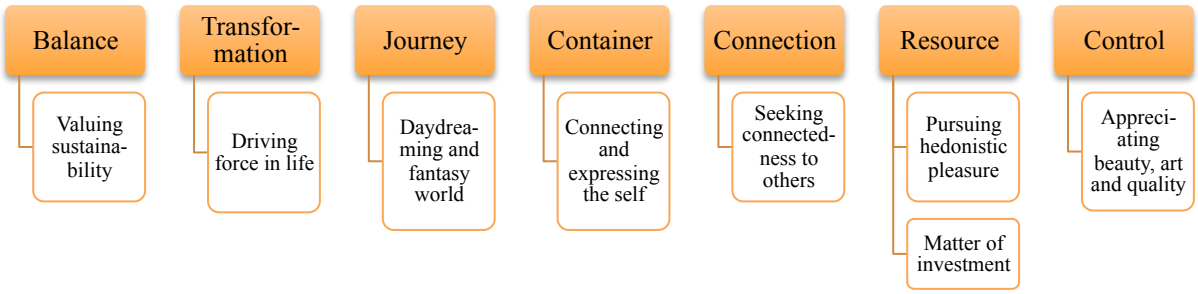

Figure 13. Collective themes and corresponding deep metaphors

5.2 Theoretical contribution of the research

Research should always provide novel explanations and information on current theoretical discussions to contribute to a particular body of disciplinary knowledge (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 37). Contributions can take a number of different forms. Typically, researchers produce contributions on either theory, method or context (Ladik & Stewart 2008, 161). As argued by McGrath and Brinberg (1983, in Närvänen 2013, 195), it is not possible for any researcher to produce equal contributions in all three domains. Instead, it is important for a researcher to produce a meaningful and novel contribution in at least one or two of these domains (Ladik & Stewart 2008, 162).

In this research, the methodological and empirical domains were highlighted. *Methodological contribution* is produced when there is a new approach to the study of phenomena. This can be achieved by creating a new method, by refining an existing method, or by studying a phenomenon with a method that has not been used before in a similar context (Ladik & Stewart 2008, 162). Here, the methodological contribution was made by applying the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique to the study of luxury brand meanings, which offered a totally new way of examining the field. Contemporary research on luxury consumption has been dominated by quantitative research methodologies, such as surveys and BLI (Brand Luxury Index) scale sampling. By using the qualitative ZMET method and analyzing the data generated through people' metaphoric expressions, the research produced rich descriptions of

the brand meanings consumers attached to luxury fashion brands. The use of projective techniques, such as ZMET, is highly recommended in similar interpretive consumer studies.

The *contribution for the context* can be made by producing new information about the specific context, such as geographical area, industry, marketing activity or type of customer. The context of the study is defined as the substantive domain or the range of the phenomenon of interest (Ladik & Stewart 2008, 163). Here, the contribution for the context was produced by combining the theory of brand meanings with the context of luxury fashion brands. This added the understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the meanings of luxury fashion brands and gave insight about how consumers participate in the co-creation of these brands. Moreover, most of the current research in this area has been focusing on luxury consumption occurring in the West, more specifically in one country and one culture at a time. Thus, the cross-cultural nature of the thesis further contributed to the context of the research, adding valuable insight about how the brand meanings are affected by the different cultural, historical and social factors.

Research that offers explanations of a phenomenon of interest and adds insight that can transcend specific methods and contexts is likely to produce a *contribution to theory* (Ladik & Stewart 2008, 162). This thesis contributes to existing literature by conceptualizing luxury brands from the consumers' perspective. Adopting the social constructionist paradigm, the thesis examines the marketplace of luxury fashion brands as a social construction, offering deeper insights into the nature and development of the brand meanings consumers have negotiated for the luxury fashion brands. The research does not concentrate on luxury fashion brands *per se,* but goes directly to identifying and analyzing what these brands mean to their customers. Thus, the study offers an alternative to the dominant managerialist perspective and points to the novel ways of conceptualizing luxury fashion brands as social constructions, highlighting the role of consumers in the process and extending the current theory of luxury brand management.

In addition, this thesis contributes to the existing CCT literature on a global level. It opens up new possibilities to understand global consumer cultures and global branding. According to Cayla and Arnould (2008), "branding research in the future will need to be contextually and historically grounded, polycentric in orientation, and acutely attuned to the symbolic significance of brands of all types". The cultural approach to branding suggested in this thesis,

is exploring the different cultures of Finland and China and the implications of these cultures to the constuction of brand meanings. To overcome the presumption of the Western brand culture as a norm, Cayla and Eckhardt (2008), who investigated how brand managers create Asian brands through the construction of imagined Asian identities, suggested that research is needed to understand how Asian consumers are interpreting brands. Focusing on the Chinese consumers, this thesis partly answers to that call.

A common strategy in justifying the contribution of the research is to spot a research gap that exists and simply fill that gap. However, this kind of reasoning for the contribution of one' research is argued as being insufficient, since the gap might exist because the issue is simply irrelevant or obvious (Ladik & Stewart 2008, 162). The main aim of this research was to extend the understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the brand meanings consumers attach to luxury fashion brands and to provide interpretations of how cultural and social factors construct these meanings. This was argued as a relevant pursuit, since in the existing literature the meanings of luxury fashion brands are often interpreted narrowly in relation to interpersonal aspects like conspicuousness and snobbery or functional attributes like higher price and higher quality, and the different dimensions are handled separately rather than together. Moreover, the situational and historical (e.g., economic, societal and cultural) factors are often left out of the consideration.

Ladik and Stewart (2008, 163) present the *contribution continuum* in their article and suggest that contribution can take eight different forms, from identical replication to developing a new theory that predicts a new phenomenon. This contribution continuum is represented in Figure 14. The research can include several types of contributions, those that extend the previous research being the most common ones. Also, the contribution produced in this research can be seen to combine the second and third forms of contribution, i.e., replication and extension of the theory/method in a new area. Such replications and extensions are usually contributions to context. This thesis cannot be argued as a replication of previous research, but it extends the knowledge of interactive brand meaning development in the new field of luxury fashion brands, and it presents three new thematic orientations that the contemporary luxury literature has not yet recognized. In addition, ZMET is a new method in the field, highlighting the third form of contribution, the extension of a new method in the field of study.

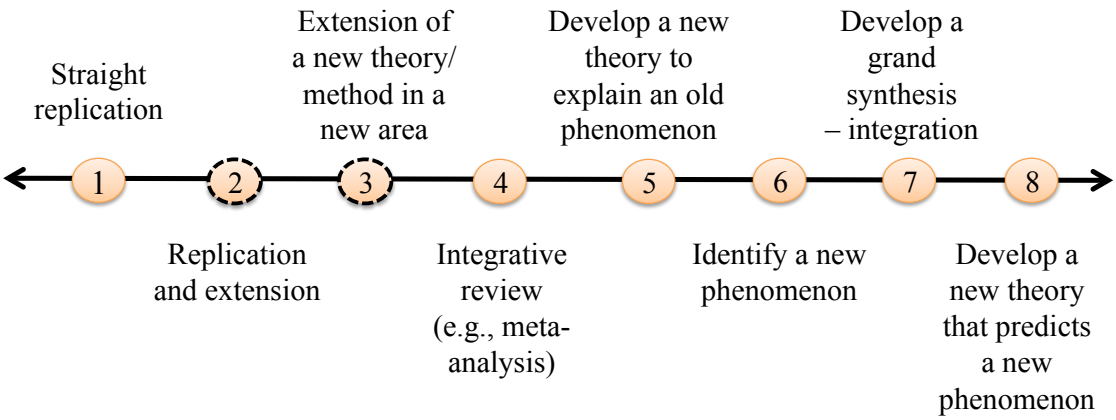

Figure 14. Contribution continuum (adapted from Ladik & Stewart 2008, 163). Highlighted types (2, 3) represent those forms in which this thesis produces the greatest contribution.

5.3 Practical implications of the research

The value and quality of any marketing research is often evaluated in terms of its perceived usefulness for practitioners in the "real world". The practical relevance of cultural research is in its ability to provide different institutions, such as firms, marketers and policy-makers, new conceptual tools for gaining a better understanding of the cultural complexity of the marketplace and to reflect their roles in it (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 36–37).

The first practical implication of this thesis is the understanding of the heterogeneous and multifaceted nature of the brand meanings associated with luxury fashion brands. The heterogeneous nature of brand meanings is understood in a wider perspective than the earlier categorization of functional, symbolic and experiential dimensions suggests. Luxury fashion brands are not constituted by clearly demarcated meanings. The consensus map integrates cognitive and emotional dimensions and leads to a holistic understanding of the deeper drivers of luxury brand meanings. With the aggregated consensus map, marketers are able to identify a broader variety of potential brand meanings that their customers might attach to their brand. Based on this, marketers should evaluate how personal/social, product-/non-product-related, or emotional/rational the brand meanings that customers attach to their products or brands are, and they should consider whether they should revise their brand strategy or brand positioning accordingly. It is recommended that brand managers focus on one or two of the collective themes instead of trying to cover all of them.

The second implication, equally important for practitioners, is the understanding of the process governing how consumers negotiate brand meanings together with the brand and their socio-cultural environment. Traditional approaches have suggested that marketers create symbolic meanings for the brands, from which consumers choose the ones that best correspond to their own self-concepts. This thesis is positioned among emerging debates of brand co-creation (see Vargo & Lusch 2004), which highlight the role of consumers in the process of shaping meanings for luxury brands. This is an especially important notion in the context of luxury fashion brands, where the dominant view has long suggested that consumers should not co-create luxury brands, since luxury brands need to stay ahead of their customers (see Kapferer & Bastien 2012). This thesis extends the managerialist view by incorporating the consumer and identifying the co-construction of brand meanings. It is suggested that luxury brands should turn their focus from firm- and product-centric brand strategies to strategies emphasizing personalized, customer-centric operations.

The third implication that might be useful for practitioners is the better understanding of the way in which social, economic and cultural forces construct meanings in the highly global markets for luxury fashion brands. As the thesis shows, considerable cross-national variations exist in the meanings consumers attach to luxury fashion brands. Social, economic and cultural factors lead consumers to create different meanings for luxury fashion brands in different socio-cultural environments. For example, the collectivist/individualist mindset of the consumers may strongly affect the other-/self-directed symbolic meanings or the perceptions of high price. Besides the cultural factors, historical and political forces also have an impact on the market actors in contemporary consumer cultures, for example affecting the materialist/postmaterialist values of the consumers. It is suggested that marketers should develop global brand strategies that are sensitive to local differences and that take into consideration the social, historical, economic and cultural factors.

The fourth implication concerns the ways in which marketers and managers acquire information about the market and their customers. Most marketing research tools rely on literal language to collect, analyze and report data (Catchings-Castello 2000, 7). However, as was shown in this thesis, people are better able to convey their thoughts in nonverbal terms, and therefore research that is strictly based on written or oral interactions might be missing some critical details. Projective techniques such as ZMET enable consumers to express themselves more properly, helping marketers to understand how they really think and feel

(Mulvey & Kavalam 2010, 373). The collective consensus map represents the interpreted, metaphorical meanings of luxury fashion brands, which can be accessed only through projective techniques. It is strongly recommended that marketers also apply techniques other than traditional questionnaires and interviews in their marketing studies, to gain better understanding of their customers.

5.4 Evaluating the research quality

Although the evaluation of the research quality is positioned at the end of this study report, it does not mean that the study was first carried out, and only after that the quality was evaluated by some external criteria. The reason for placing the discussion here was simply to get the reader through the research process first, and then to evaluate whether the criteria for quality evaluation were fulfilled. As Moisander and Valtonen (2006, 21) suggest, criteria for evaluating a study are rooted in the theoretical and methodological perspectives chosen, and they have been guiding the different choices throughout the whole research process, from developing the theoretical framework to generating, analyzing and interpreting the data. The researcher has been continuously evaluating the quality of the research process.

The three concepts of reliability, validity and generalizability provide a basic framework for judging the quality of research in social sciences and business research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 291). However, these evaluation criteria are suitable for studies focusing on objective indicators, rather than on subjective meanings of the data. They are appropriate criteria for studies that rely on the realist or critical conceptions of the social world, producing findings that can be empirically tested and confirmed (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 21). This study was based on the interpretive research philosophy and the social constructionist paradigm, which means that the research is embedded with values and that knowledge and reality are seen as continuously constructed through subjective experiences and shared meanings between people. Thus, the interpretations that are produced do not represent the "one and only truth," but rather one way of interpreting and making sense of the phenomenon (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 150).

Due to the different nature of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions in constructionist studies as compared to traditional business studies, constructionists argue for

quality criteria that translate the classic notions of validity, reliability and generalizability into trustworthiness and authenticity (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 480). The concept most often applied to evaluate this kind of research is Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness, which is divided into four categories: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Lincoln and Guba's criteria are also used to evaluate the trustworthiness of this study.

The concept of *credibility* is the constructionist equivalent of internal validity (Denzin 1994, 508). This means that the research is carried out by obeying a good research practice, the researcher has familiarity with the topic and the data is sufficient to merit the claims (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). According to Patton (2002, 552), credibility can be achieved by applying rigorous methods to systematically analyze high-quality data. Lincoln and Guba (1985, 307) suggest three ways of improving the credibility of the research: prolonged period of engagement, persistent observation and triangulation.

Prolonged period of engagement increases the likelihood of learning the phenomenon in more depth, minimizing distortions and building trust with the respondents (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 304). Prolonged period of engagement was fulfilled, since the whole research process lasted 12 months, during which the researcher familiarized herself thoroughly with the subject being studied, both in theory and in practice, by reading the previous literature and working for a luxury fashion brand. Distortions were rather easily minimized with the Finnish respondents, since there was an informal and relaxed atmosphere and they were comfortable with asking questions, particularly about the ZMET instructions. With Chinese respondents, this was more challenging, but to minimize the distortions an interpreter was used. In a similar way, it was easier to build trust with the Finnish respondents, as the researcher had the same native language and cultural background, but several e-mails and Skype calls, before the interviews, created trusted relationships with the Chinese respondents as well.

Persistent observation facilitates the identification of the specific characteristics and elements of the phenomenon that are most relevant to the research problem (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 304). Persistent observation was not fulfilled in terms of the time spent with the participants, since the interview data was generated in single interviews lasting 45–120 minutes. However, the observation of the whole phenomenon was constant due to the work and personal experience of the researcher, which helped in identifying and assessing salient factors in the interviews. In addition, the pilot interview that was conducted before the actual interviews

with one Finnish luxury consumer, gave important information about the specific elements that needed to be taken into account in the actual interviews.

Finally, *triangulation* refers to the process of using diverse sources or perspectives of information (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 307). Different forms of triangulation can be used either separately or in combination (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 292). There were 12 participants in the study, so multiple sources of information were used (triangulation of data), and since ZMET is considered a hybrid method, the triangulation of methods was inherent to the technique. Triangulation is usually based on the assumption that by overcoming partial views through using multiple sources of data, it is possible to produce a truer representation of the phenomenon. However, in cultural research, the object of knowledge *is* different from different perspectives, and these perspectives cannot be merged into one "true" representation of the object (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 25). Thus, triangulation should be viewed as a "display of multiple realities simultaneously" (Denzin & Lincoln 2003, 8).

Transferability corresponds to the external validity in a constructive research (Denzin 1994, 508). Because qualitative research is always linked to its context, it is not possible to verify its external validity. However, it should offer a highly detailed thick description of the cultural phenomenon being studied, enabling readers to see the phenomenon in their own experience and consider whether or not the transfer is possible (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 316; Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 30). Thus, transferability concerns how the findings of the study can be applied to some other contexts or situations. Transferability does not necessarily mean broad theoretical claims, but a certain level, in which the reader can make connections between parts of the study and his/her own understanding and previous experiences (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 29). To improve the transferability of the research, the researcher is required to establish some form of connection between his/her findings and previous studies (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294).

In this study, the brand meanings were examined in the context of luxury fashion brands. The findings were thoroughly compared to the results of similar studies, and it was found that five of the thematic orientations were widely recognized in the contemporary literature, but three of the themes were new in the field. Informants were young Finnish and Chinese females who lived in the cities and consumed luxury fashion. This naturally affects the transferability judgments concerning other contexts. The description of the whole research process can also

give valuable insights about adopting the ZMET method in studying brand meanings in different contexts.

Dependability is concerned with the logic, traceability and documentation of the research process (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). It is the constructionist equivalent to reliability (Denzin 1994, 508), but it does not suggest that the documentation of the research process is important because some future researcher would be able to repeat the study and end up with similar findings; it is valuable because it enables the reader to evaluate the quality of the whole research process (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 27). In cultural studies, it is especially important that the researcher makes the research process as transparent as possible and indicates explicitly from which perspective the interpretations are produced (Daymon & Holloway 2011, 128). The systematic and rigorous manner of conducting the research is highly important in cultural studies (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 28).

Although it is not always possible to make all the steps in the research process transparent to the reader (Gummesson 2005, 312), transparency was the desired goal of the research process. To strengthen the dependability of the research, the whole process from theory development to data generation and analysis was described as clearly as possible, to allow the readers to follow the line of thought and the interpretations of the researcher. In the data generation phase, the ZMET interviews were recorded and transcribed carefully, so it was possible to listen to the recordings again and re-read the transcriptions to confirm the researcher's understanding. Transcripts were coded in the same order as the interviews were conducted, and they were coded twice, to make sure that the codes created with the later transcripts were applied equally to the earlier transcripts. The interpretations were justified with actual quotations and linked to the data and the paradigmatic stance (social constructionism) from which the interpretations were developed.

Conformability is based on the assumption of objectivity (Denzin 1994, 508). Constructionists regard objectivity as an impossibility, since "each of us ... must encounter the world from some perspective or other ... and the questions we come to ask about that world, and the theories we use, must also of necessity arise from the assumptions that are embedded in our perspective" (Burr 2003, 152). Although in cultural studies the research is always somewhat subjective, the researcher should not let her background, biases or interests significantly affect the interpretations of the findings (Daymon & Holloway 2011, 128). Therefore, the findings

and interpretations should be strongly linked to the data, in ways that are easily understood by others (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). These linkages elucidate the extent to which the findings of the study are shaped by the respondents and not by the imagination or individual aspects of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 318).

To improve the conformability of the study, the interpretations were grounded in the data. Quotations from the ZMET interviews were used to illustrate the links between the actual data and the researcher's interpretations. Still, other interpretations could be made, since "there may be many wrong interpretations of a text, but there is always more than one good interpretation of it" (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 26). Offering the reader concrete examples of the interviews, in the forms of quotations and images, provided detailed evidence with which the reader judge whether they believed the interpretations or not. Pictures that the participants had collected for the interviews were included in Figure 11 and in Appendix 2. Visualizing relevant aspects of the data, instead of merely relying on the researcher's narrative, improves the dependability of the study (Närvänen 2013, 202). All of the claims that were made in the study are in line with the data on which they were based.

5.5 Further research directions

We cannot hope to understand consumer behavior without first gaining some understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions.
(Belk 1988, 139)

In the competitive environment of the luxury fashion business, to create long-term relationships with customers and to attract new fans for the brands, marketers have to understand the types of meanings sought by consumers and the processes of how these meanings are constructed. It is suggested that consumer researchers should turn their focus on understanding the perceived personal relevance of these special brands from the consumers' point of view. ZMET provides a robust technique to gain such consumer insight, and it is therefore recommended, along with other projective techniques, as one of the most appropriate methods for these kinds of inquiries in the future.

Like any other research, this study has its limitations, which, however, create interesting possibilities for future studies. This thesis concentrated only on two countries, namely Finland

and China. Further comparative studies involving other countries and cultures would provide interesting insight into the subject. Moreover, the study focused on affluent, urban citizens, but in China alone, there are 56 different ethnic groups, living in different-tier cities. Here, the Chinese respondents were from the first-tier cities, but it would be interesting to compare the interpretations of luxury brands by consumers from different-tier cities (second and third). Similarly, examining the interpretations of luxury by Finnish consumers living in the big cities and in the countryside would increase our understanding of the socio-cultural nature of the brand meanings.

This thesis focused on socio-cultural constructs, not on the individual-level factors that obviously influence the creation of different brand meanings. By focusing on the psychological processes behind the meaning-making process, future research would gain fruitful insight about the personal drivers behind brand meanings and the neuro-psychological factors affecting them. Furthermore, the third element of the meaning-making process, the brand, could be a focus of future studies, for example by exploring the brand meanings the brand managers have created for the brand and how these meanings differ from those created by their customers. It would be interesting to take one or two luxury fashion brands as case study examples.

The eight thematic orientations that arose from the data were similar to the deep metaphors that are considered universal for people all over the world. It would be interesting to study the meanings and their connections to the corresponding deep metaphors in more depth. Moreover, the eight thematic orientations could be studied further, also by using different methods, to enhance the transferability and dependability of the findings.

However, apart from the methodological and contextual possibilities, the most interesting subject for future research is the concept of luxury for postmodern consumers. In societies where people have adopted the postmaterialist values, the interpretations of what is felt as luxurious are very different from those that have been dominating the economic, and marketing, view of the luxury concept. Signs of softer, more experiential, more ecological and more ethical meanings can be recognized in this study, and these meanings are something that future consumers are increasingly interested in – and future researchers should be, too.

REFERENCES

Literature

Alasuutari, P. 2011. Laadullinen tutkimus 2.0. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Aledin, S. 2009. Teenagers' Brand Relationships in Daily Life – A Qualitative Study of Brand Meanings Among Teenagers in Helsinki and London Metropolitan Areas. Academic Dissertation. Series A– 4/2009. Turku: Uniprint.

Arndt, J. 1985. On Making Marketing Science More Scientific: Role of Orientations, Paradigms, Metaphors, and Puzzle Solving. Journal of Marketing, 49 (3), 11–23.

Arnould, E. J. & Thompson, G. J. 2005. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research. Journal of Consumer Research, 31 (3), 868–882.

Astous, A. & Deschenes, J. 2005. Consuming in One's Mind: An Exploration. Psychology & Marketing, 22 (1), 1–30.

Autio, M. & Heinonen, V. 2004. To Consume or Not to Consume? Young People's Environmentalism in the Affluent Finnish Society. Young – Nordic Journal of Youth Research, 12 (2), 137–153.

Baker, M. J. & Saren, M. 2010. Marketing Theory: A Student Text. London: SAGE Publications.

Batey, M. 2008. Brand Meaning. New York: Routledge.

Baudrillard, J. 2006. The System of Objects (Radical Thinkers). London: Verso.

Belk, R. W. 1988. Possessions and the Extended Self. Journal of Consumer Research, 15 (9), 139–68.

Belk, R. W. 1995. Studies in the New Consumer Behaviour. In: Acknowledging Consumption. A Review of New Studies, ed. by D. Miller. 58-95. London: Routledge.

Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M. & Sherry, J. F. 1989. The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey. The Journal of Consumer Research, 16 (1), 1–38.

Bengtsson, A. 2002. Consumers and Mixed Brands: On the Polysemy of Brand Meaning. Academic Dissertation. Lund Studies in Economics and Management 70. Lund: Lund Business Press.

Berger, A. A. 2010. The Objects of Affection: Semiotics and Consumer Culture. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Berry, C. J. 1994. The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berthon, P., Pitt, L., Parent, M. & Berthon J-P. 2009. Aesthetics and Ephemerality: Observing and Preserving the Luxury Brand. California Management Review, 52 (1), 45–66.

Bian, X. & Veloutsou, C. 2007. Consumers' Attitudes Regarding Non-Deceptive Counterfeit Brands in the UK and China. Journal of Brand Management, 12 (3), 211–22.

Black, I. R. & Cherrier, H. 2010. Anti-Consumption as Part of Living a Sustainable Lifestyle: Daily Practices, Contextual Motivations and Subjective Values. Journal of Consumer Behavior, 9 (6), 437–453.

Burr, V. 2003. Social Constructionism. London: Routledge.

Catchings-Castello, G. 2000. The ZMET Alternative. Marketing Research, 12 (2), 6–12.

Cayla, J. & Eckhardt, G. 2008. Asian Brands and the Shaping of a Transnational Imagined Community. Journal of Consumer Research, 35 (2), 216–230.

Cayla, J. & Arnould, E. J. 2008. A Cultural Approach to Branding in the Global Marketplace. Journal of the International Marketing, 16 (4), 86–112.

Chadha, R. & Husband, P. 2006. The Cult of the Luxury Brand: Inside Asia's Love Affair with Luxury. London: Nicholas Brealey International.

Chan, C., Berger, J. & Boven, L. V. 2012. Social Identity and Uniqueness Motives in Choice. Journal of Consumer Research, 39 (3), 561–573.

Choo, H. J., Moon, H., Kim, H. & Yoon, N. 2012. Luxury Customer Value. Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 16 (1), 81–101.

Christensen, G. L. & Olson, J. C. 2002. Mapping Consumers' Mental Models with ZMET. Psychology and Marketing, 19 (6), 477–502.

Christodoulides, G., Michaelidou, N. & Li, C. H. 2009. Measuring Perceived Brand Luxury: An Evaluation of the BLI Scale. Journal of Brand Management, 16 (5/6), 395–405.

Cova, B. 1997. Community and Consumption: Towards a Definition of the "Linking Value" of Product or Services. European Journal of Marketing, 31 (3), 297–316.

Cova, B. & Pace, S. 2006. Brand Community of Convenience Products: New Forms of Customer Empowerment – the Case "My Nutella The Community". European Journal of Marketing, 40 (9/10), 1087–1105.

Daymon, C. & Holloway, I. 2011. Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications. New York: Routledge.

Dedeoglu, Ö. A. & Savasci, I. 2010. The Feelings of Consumer Guilt: A Phenomenological Exploration. Journal of Business, Economics and Management, 11 (3), 462–482.

Denzin, N. 1994. The Art and Politics of Interpretation. In: Handbook of Qualitative Research, ed. by Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. 500–115. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. 1994. Handbook of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. 2003. Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Dittmar, H. 1992. The Social Psychology of Material Possessions: To Have Is to Be. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Dommer, S. L., Swaminathan, V. & Ahluwalia, R. 2013. Using Differentiated Brands to Deflect Exclusion and Protect Inclusion: The Moderating Role of Self-Esteem on Attachment to Differentiated Brands. Journal of Consumer Research, 40 (4), 657–675.

Dong, L. & Tian, K. 2009. The Use of Western Brands in Asserting Chinese National Identity. Journal of Consumer Research, 36 (10), 504–523.

Dubois, B., Czellar, S. & Laurent, G. 2005. Consumer Segments Based on Attitudes Toward Luxury: Empirical Evidence from Twenty Countries. Marketing Letters, 16 (2), 115–128.

Eriksson, P. & Kovalainen, A. 2008. Qualitative Methods in Business Research. London: SAGE Publications.

Escalas, J. E. & Bettman, J. R. 2003. You Are What They Eat: The Influence of Reference Groups on Consumers' Connections to Brands. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 13 (3), 339–348.

Escalas, J. E. & Bettman, J. R. 2005. Self-Construal, Reference Groups and Brand Meaning. Journal of Consumer Research, 32 (6), 378–389.

Firat, A. F. & Venkatesh, A. 1995. Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption. Journal of Consumer Research, 22 (12), 239–267.

Fiske, J. 1993. Merkkien kieli. Johdatus viestinnän tulkitsemiseen. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Fournier, S. & Guiry, M. 1993. "An Emerald Green Jaguar, A House on Nantucket, and an African Safari:" Wish Lists and Consumption Dreams in Materialist Society. Advances in Consumer Research, 20 (1), 352–358.

Gardner, B. B. & Levy, S. J. 1955. The Product and the Brand. Harvard Business Review, 3 (March–April), 33–39.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. 1967. The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. 1994. Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research. In: Handbook of Qualitative Research, ed. by Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. 105–117. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Gummesson, E. 2005. Qualitative Research in Marketing. Road-Map for a Wilderness of Complexity and Unpredictability. European Journal of Marketing, 39 (3/4), 309–327.

Gurrieri, L. & Cherrier, H. 2011. Images of Identity in Consumer Research: A Study of the Worship, Experimentation, Community and Domination of Signs. Advances in Consumer Research, 39, 360–365.

Hall, S. 1997. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London: SAGE Publications.

Hansen, J. & Wänke, Michaela. 2011. The Abstractness of Luxury. Journal of Economic Psychology, 32 (5), 789–796.

Hennigs, N., Wiedmann, K-P., Klarmann, C. & Behrens, S. 2013. Sustainability as Part of the Luxury Essence: Delivering value through Social and Environmental Excellence. Journal of Corporate Citizenship, 52 (4), 25–35.

Hirschman, E. C. & Holbrook, M. B. 1982. Hedonic Consumption: Emerging Concepts, Methods and Propositions. Journal of Marketing, 46 (3), 92–101.

Hofstede, G. 1991. Cultures and Organizations: Software of Mind. New York: McGraw Hill.

Hofstede, G. & Hofstede, G. J. 2005. Cultures and Organizations: Software of Mind. New York: McGraw Hill.

Holt, D. B. 1997. Poststructuralist Lifestyle Analysis: Conceptualisation of Social Patterning of Consumption. Journal of Consumer Research, 23 (4), 326–350.

Hunt, S. & Hansen, J. M. 2010. The Philosophical Foundations of Marketing Research: For Scientific Realism and Truth. In: The Sage Handbook of Marketing Theory, ed. by Maclaran, P., Saren, M., Stern, B. & Tadajewski, M. 111–126. London: SAGE Publications.

Inglehart, R. 1990. Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Järvensivu, T. & Törnroos, J. Å. 2010. Case Study Research with Moderate Constructionism: Conceptualization and Practical Illustration. Industrial Marketing Management, 39 (1), 100–108.

Joy, A & Li, E. P. H. 2012. Studying Consumption Behavior Through Multiple Lenses: An Overview of Consumer Culture Theory. Journal of Business Anthropology, 1 (1), 1–33.

Kaiser, Susan. 1998. The Social Psychology of Clothing. Symbolic Appearances in Context. New York: Fairchild Publications.

Kapferer, J. N. & Bastien, V. 2012. The Luxury Strategy: Break the Rules of Marketing to Build Luxury Brands. London: Kogan Page.

Kapferer, J. N. & Michaut-Denizeau, A. 2014. Is Luxury Compatible to Sustainability. Luxuy Consumers' Viewpoint. Journal of Brand Management, 21 (1), 1–22.

Keller, K. L. 2003. Brand Synthesis: The Multidimensionality of Brand Knowledge. Journal of Consumer Research, 29 (4), 595–600.

Kemp, S. 1998. Perceiving Luxury and Necessity. Journal of Economic Psychology, 19 (5), 591–606.

Kleine, R. E., Kleine, S. & Kernan, J. B. 1993. Mundane Consumption and the Self: A Social Identity Perspective. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 2 (3), 209–235.

Kleine, R. E. & Kleine. S. 2000. Consumption and Self-Schema Changes Throughout the Identity Project Lifecycle. Advances in Consumer Research, 27 (1), 279–285.

Ladik, D. M. & Stewart, D.W. 2008. The Contribution Continuum. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 36 (2), 157–165.

Lehtonen, M. 1996. Merkitysten maailma. Kulttuurisen tekstintutkimuksen lähtökohtia. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Leibenstein, H. 1950. Bandwagon, Snob, and Veblen Effects in the Theory of Consumers' Demand. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 64 (2), 183–207.

Levy, S. J. 1959. Symbols for Sale. Harvard Business Review, 37 (8), 117–124.

Li, G., Li, G. & Kambele, Z. 2011. Luxury Fashion Brand Consumers in China: Perceived Value, Fashion Lifestyle and Willingness to Pay. Journal of Business Research, 65 (10), 1516–1522.

Ligas, M. & Cotte, J. 1999. The Process of Negotiating Brand Meaning. Advances in Consumer Research, 26 (1), 609–614.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. 1985. Naturalistic Inquiry. London: SAGE Publications.

Maclaran, P., Saren, M., Stern, B. & Tadajewski, M. 2011. The Sage Handbook of Marketing Theory. London: SAGE Publications.

Markus, H. R. & Kitayama, S. 1991. Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion and Motivation. Psychological Review, 98 (2), 224–253.

Martinez-Alier, J. (1995) The Environment as a Luxury Good or "Too Poor to Be Green"? Ecological Economics, 13 (1), 1–10.

Maslow, A. H. 1970. Motivation and Personality. New York: Harper and Row.

McCracken, G. 1986. Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods. Journal of Consumer Research, 13 (1), 71–84.

McCracken, G. 1993. The Value of the Brand: An Anthropological Perspective. In: Brand Equity & Advertising: Advertising's Role in Building Strong Brands, ed. by Aaker, D. A & Biel, A. L. 125–139. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.

Mick, D. G. 1986. Consumer Research and Semiotics: Exploring the Morphology of Signs, Symbols, and Significance. Journal of Consumer Research, 13 (2), 196–213.

Mick, D. G. & Oswald, L. R. 2006. The Semiotic Paradigm on Meaning in the Marketplace. In: Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing, ed. by Belk, R.W. 31–45. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Miller, K. W. & Mills, M. K. 2012. Contributing Clarity by Examining Brand Luxury in The Fashion Market. Journal of Business Research, 65 (10), 1471–1479.

Moisander, J. & Valtonen, A. 2006. Qualitative Marketing Research: A Cultural Approach. London: SAGE Publications.

Mulvey, M. S. & Kavalam, B. E. 2010. Mining Deeper Meaning in Consumer Decision Maps. Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 13 (4), 372–388.

Muniz, A. M. Jr. & O'Guinn, T. C. 2001. Brand Community. Journal of Consumer Research, 27 (4), 412–432.

Närvänen, E. 2013. Extending the Collective Consumption of Brands. Academic Dissertation. Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 1868. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Nueno, J. L. & Quelch, J. A. 1998. The Mass Marketing of Luxury. Business Horizons, 41 (6), 61–68.

Okonkwo, U. 2007. Luxury Fashion Branding: Trends, Tactics, Techniques. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

O'Shaugnessy, J. 2010. Debates Concerning the Scientific Methods: Social Science Theory and the Philosophy of Science. In: The Sage Handbook of Marketing Theory, ed. by Maclaran, P., Saren, M., Stern, B. & Tadajewski, M. 174–191. London: SAGE Publications.

Oswald, L. 2012. Marketing Semiotics: Signs, Strategies, and Brand Value. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M. & Kemmelmeier, M. 2002. Rethinking Individualism and Collectivism: Evaluation of Theoretical Assumptions and Meta-Analyses. Psychological Bulletin, 128 (1), 3–72.

Patton, M. Q. 2002. Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Penaloza, L. & Venkatesh, A. 2006. Further Evolving the New Dominant Logic of Marketing: From Services to the Social Construction of Markets. Marketing Theory, 6 (3), 299–316.

Peter, J. P. & Olson, J. C. 2004. Consumer Behaviour and Marketing Strategy. Boston, MA: Irwin.

Popper, K. R. 1975. Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rajaniemi, P. 1990. Tuotteiden äänettömät viestit. Discussion Papers 120. Proceedings of the University of Vaasa.

Roper, S., Caruana, R., Medway, D. & Murphy, P. 2013. Constructing Luxury Brands: Exploring the Role of Consumer Discourse. European Journal of Marketing, 47 (3/4), 375–400.

Sassatelli, R. 2007. Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics. London: SAGE Publications.

Sekora, J. 1977. Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Schimmack, U., Oishi, S., & Diener, E. 2005. Individualism: A Valid and Important Dimension of Cultural Differences Between Nations. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 9 (1), 17–31.

Schwandt, T. A. 2000. Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, and Social Constructionism. In: Handbook of Qualitative Research, ed. by Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. 189–214. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Seppänen, J. 2001. Katseen voima. Kohti visuaalista lukutaitoa. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Shukla, P. 2010. Status Consumption in Cross-National Context. Socio-Psychological, Brand and Situational Antecedents. International Marketing Review, 27 (1), 108–129.

Shukla, P. & Purani, K. 2011. Comparing the Importance of Luxury Value Perceptions in Cross-National Context. Journal of Business Research, 65 (10), 1417–1424.

Silverstein, M. & Fiske, N. 2003. Luxury For the Masses. Harvard Business Review, 81 (4), 48–57.

Silverman, D. 2005. Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook. London: SAGE Publications.

Smith, B., J. & Colgate, M. 2007. Customer Value Creation: A Practical Framework. Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 15 (1), 7–23.

Smith, E. R. & Mackie, D. M. 2007. Social Psychology. New York: Psychology Press.

Solomon, M. R. 1983. The Role of Products as Social Stimuli: A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective. Journal of Consumer Research, 10 (12), 319–329.

Solomon, M. R. 2003 Conquering Consumerspace: Marketing Strategies for a Branded World. New York: Amacom.

Solomon, M. R. 2004. Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having and Being. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

Solomon, M. R., Bamossy, G., Askegaard, P. S. & Hogg, M. K. Consumer Behavior: A European Perspective. Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. 2008. Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Sugai, P. 2005. Mapping the Mind of the Mobile Consumer Across Borders. An Application of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. International Marketing Review, 22 (6), 641–657.

Tafarodi, R. W., Marshall, T. C. & Katsura, H. 2004. Standing Out in Canada and Japan. Journal of Personality, 72 (4), 785–814.

Talvio, P. 2011. Häpeän tunteet kulutuksessa. Academic Dissertation. Aalto University Publication Series 5/2011. Helsinki: Aalto Print.

Thompson, C. J. & Haytko, D. L. 1997. Speaking of Fashion: Consumers' Uses of Fashion Discourses and the Appropriation of Countervailing Cultural Meanings. Journal of Consumer Research, 24 (1), 15–42.

Tian, K. T., Bearden, W. O. & Hunter, G. L. 2001. Consumers' Need for Uniqueness: Scale Development and Validation. Journal of Consumer Research, 28 (1), 50–66.

Torelli, C. & Aggarwal, P. 2011. Individual Vs. Collective Autonomy: How Culture Shapes Judgments and Behaviors. Advances in Consumer Research, 39 (1), 69–72.

Torelli, C. & Cheng, S. 2011. Cultural Meanings of Brands and Consumption: A Window into the Cultural Psychology of Globalization. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 5 (5), 251–262.

Tuomi, J. & Sarajärvi, A. 2009. Laadullinen tutkimus ja sisällönanalyysi. Helsinki: Tammi.

Turunen, L. 2009. Luksusta ja ranteessa killuvaa rautaa: Aidon ja jäljitelmäluksuksen merkityksiä kuluttajalle. Master's Thesis. University of Vaasa.

Turunen, L. & Laaksonen, P. 2011. Diffusing the Boundaries Between Luxury and Counterfeits. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 20 (6), 468–474.

Tynan, C., McKechnie, S. & Chhuon, C. 2010. Co-Creating Value for Luxury Brands. Journal of Business Research, 63 (11), 1156–1163.

Vargo, S. L. & Lusch, R. F. 2004. Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. Journal of Marketing, 68 (1), 1–17.

Veblen, T. 1889. Reprint 1994. The Theory of the Leisure Class. New York: Penguin Books.

Vigneron, F. & Johnson, L.W. 2004. Measuring Perceptions of Brand Luxury. Journal of Brand Management, 11 (6), 484–506.

Vickers, J. S. & Renand, F. 2003. The Marketing of Luxury Goods: An Exploratory Study – Three Conceptual Dimensions. The Marketing Review, 3 (4), 459–784.

Weigert, A. J., Teitge, J. S. Teitge, D. W. 1986. Society and Identity – Toward a Sociological Psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wiedmann, K. P, Hennigs, N. & Siebels, A. 2007. Measuring Consumers' Luxury Value Perception: A Cross-Cultural Framework. Academy of Marketing Science Review, 7 (3), 1–21.

Wong, N. & Ahuvia, A. 1998. Personal Taste and Family Face: Luxury Consumption in Confusian and Western Societies. Psychology and Marketing, 15 (5), 423–441.

Zaltman, G. & Coulter, R. 1995. Seeing the Voice of the Customer: Metaphor-Based Advertising Research. Journal of Advertising Research, 35 (4), 35–51.

Zaltman, G. 1997. Rethinking Market Research: Putting People Back In. Journal of Marketing Research, 34 (4), 424–437.

Zaltman, G. 2003. How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Zaltman, G. & Zaltman, L. 2008. Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal About the Minds of Consumers. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

WWW -pages

Asian Marketing - Brand Strategy. 2006. Wigley, C. East Meets West.
Printed 30.4.2014
< http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-148297296.html>

Bain & Company. 2014. Annual Global Luxury Study 2014.
Printed 27.10.2014
<http://www.bain.com/about/press/press-releases/bain-and-companys-2014-annual-global-luxury-study.aspx>

Business of Fashion. 2013. Luxury Sales to Exceed $318 Billion, Driven by Emerging Markets and 'Affordable Luxury'.
Printed 23.11.2013
<http://www.businessoffashion.com/2013/10/euromonitor-coach-michael-kors-louis vuitton-versace-fflur-roberts.html>

Huffington Post. 2014. 5 Truths the Fashion Industry Doesn't Want You to Know.
Printed 30.9.2014
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shannon-whitehead/5-truths-the-fast-fashion_b_5690575.html>

Kulutustutkimus. 2012. Nyrhinen, J. & Wilska, T.-A. Kohti vastuullista ylellisyyttä? Eettiset ja ekologiset trendit sekä luksuskulutus Suomessa.
Printed 18.8.2014
<http://www.kulutustutkimus.net/nyt/wpcontent/uploads/2012/05/Nyrhinen_Wilska_ KTS_1_2012.pdf>

Los Angeles Times. 1996. Zaltman, G. What Do Consumers Want? Whatever You Do, Don't Just Ask.
Printed 15.6.2014
< http://articles.latimes.com/1996-03-21/news/ls-49335_1_consumer-behavior>

The Economist. 2014. Disillusioned Hedonist Shoppers.
Printed 27.10.2014
< http://www.economist.com/blogs/schumpeter/2014/02/luxury-goods-market>

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: E-mail invitation and instructions for the informant A to take part in the study.

Dear A,

I'm writing You this e-mail, concerning my Master's thesis study about luxury fashion brands, in accordance to message I just got from ***, my Finnish friend. I contacted *** about a month ago and asked if he could help me to find interviewees from his acquaintances in Shanghai that have some personal experiences and thoughts about luxury brands. No professional experience is required, because I'm interviewing only consumers and I'm interested how they relate themselves to these brands being consumed. So first of all, I really want to express my deepest thanks to You, for saying yes to this study and being willing to give some of Your valuable time for the purposes of this research.

I'm flying to China next week, and I'm going to stay in Shanghai from Thursday to Tuesday morning (6.-11.3.2014). I'm very flexible with the time arrangements, so we can decide the time and place according to what is most suitable for You. We can meet e.g. in some cafeteria/restaurant around your office or home, so no time will be wasted on traffic. The interview will last around 1-1.5 hours. Would You like to suggest some time slots, which would be most suitable for You?

I guess *** has already informed You about the interview method I will be using. It's a marketing research technique called ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique), which elicits both conscious and unconscious thoughts by exploring consumers' non-literal, or metaphoric, expressions by using images.

To prepare for our meeting, I would like to ask You to collect around 8-10 pictures that represent how you feel about luxury fashion brands. This doesn't mean that You have to have 10 pictures about different shoes or bags, but more on what comes to Your mind when You think about luxury fashion. For example, when studying the future retail store, there were pictures about nature, about high-tech and about people. These were reflections on what people were hoping for more on the future retail scene. You can collect these photos from magazines, from Internet or take pictures by Yourself. This shouldn't take too much of Your time, so less than 10 pictures is okay, too. The interview will be based on talking about these pictures guided by my questions. Usually this method is considered really interesting and nice also from the interviewees' point of view.

So, once again, I'm really thankful for your participation in this study and I want to stress the fact that all the interviews are kept anonymous. Please, suggest some suitable time slots for You, so we can arrange the meeting. I'm looking forward to hearing from You soon!

Best Regards,

Sonja Lahtinen
Marketing student, Master's thesis worker
University of Tampere, Finland

APPENDIX 2: Examples of the images in ZMET interviews

"It's the emotional state. Like a very strong excitement, or thrill. It's like going to the Chanel store for the very first time, you know, your stomach is tingling and you are almost in shock, because you see the things around you that you have been only dreaming of. Very strong feeling of excitement, like tasting something you haven't ever tasted before." (2)

"This surpasses reality, it is like a fantasy world. You could never walk here to have your morning coffee dressed like that. But that makes it luxury; it is out of this world. For me, luxury is strongly linked to dreams, but it doesn't mean I'm only dreaming about the material goods, but the close connection with some kind of fantasy world." (2)

"This is taken from the ad of the Paulig where they have these highly talented artisans. It embraces the craftsmanship and the special skills to create something with your hands. I appreciate the fact that many luxury products are still made by artisans." (1)

"Luxury fashion can give you self-confidence. You know, when you wear ripped jeans and white tank top and then you add a branded bag to your outfit, you feel like 'I rock!' If I wouldn't wear the bag I wouldn't get the feeling. It's weird, but it brings some kind of boost to your presence, you get a good feeling about yourself. You feel like, 'Hey, I'm a classy lady.' And even if other people don't even notice that, you put yourself on some kind of pedestal in your own head." (4)

"I've noticed that after my job has changed radically, I've started to be more interested about what I'm wearing. I wouldn't say it's a matter of social status or anything, it's more like an indicator for myself that I'm competent to work in my position." (1)

"The best thing is that I have a couple of real friends who have the same value for life as me, and we cherish each other. I can meet them frequently and we can talk to each other about common topics. We love luxury fashion and it is like our mutual hobby." (A)

"This was a very special moment for me, when I was having a midnight coffee in Gucci store with my sister. I wouldn't do that kind of things alone I guess, it's the thing you can share the moments, and sometimes the shoes you buy, with someone. Mostly I do it with my sister. It's like our common thing." (1)

"It's like feeling connected to myself and my own values. Living the life that looks like me is luxury to me. That's why the brands I use have to be matching with my lifestyle, my values, and my own personal me. That way I can also tell other people what kind of things I value and who I am." (3)

"In this society we have a lot of ways to communicate with each other and I think that luxury goods are actually one way to convey your personal style to others." (F)

"I have this picture about pristine nature, because I thought that although buying and using luxury brands is a way of consumption, it is more sustainable, both the production and consumption, compared to disposable consumption, where you use the product, made in Vietnam, once or twice and throw it away. I've noticed that after I bought my first luxury bag, my consumption habits have changed dramatically. Before when I was traveling I bought all kinds of stuff, because it was cheap, now I'm weighing my every purchase more carefully. Do I need it, do I want it. And if I buy a bag, I assume it's going to last, if not the entire life, at least for decades. I don't have to buy a new one all the time." (1)

"I really value luxury fashion brands, because they are made so durable and long-lasting that they can actually move from one generation to another. I appreciate the practicality that they really last so well while you are still using them almost every day. Im thinking green – things that last are much more valuable for me than things that do not." (3)